

How Does God Act Within Creation? Providence, Miracles, and Prayers

Review of Week One. Calvin's view of Meticulous Providence

One of the most significant and influential Protestant theologians is John Calvin (1509-1564), author of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in which Calvin argues that the murder of the bewildered merchant is not just foreseen by God but was “fixed by God’s decree.” Calvin justifies this view using Job 14:5, which he reads as meaning that the life span of every person (to the minute) is pre-determined by God without reference to any factor other than God’s own will. (Of course, Calvin relies upon a fuller biblical analysis than just a single verse.) Using this framework, Calvin argues that every event that happens to a person is the actual will of God for them and is, therefore, “just and fitting.” This is the doctrine of Meticulous Providence.

In response to this line of argument, I suggested that there is convincing evidence that factors such as better health care, better infrastructure, and better enforcement of safety regulations affect the timing of a person’s death. Job 14:5 is a rhetorical overstatement (used in an argumentative context) of the truth that God holds the world, and us, “in his hands.” (All biblical interpretation is influenced by our traditions and contexts.) And, I argued, that the reliance upon the philosophical concept of Compatibilism (that God’s fixed and non-contingent decrees are NOT incompatible with human freedom) and the theological concept of God’s secret will (what actual happens is the real will of God, even if it is contrary to God’s declared will) are evidence that Calvin’s reading is contrary to the biblical narrative as a whole and contrary to our lived experience with God.

The significance of Meticulous Providence for our consideration of Evil and Suffering in our world is that it leads to a potentially fatal religious conundrum, either God wills evil things to happen to us or nothing that happens to us is evil. As the latter is considered by many to be an absurd reading of their current existence, they chose the former, which is fatal to faith and trust.

In my view, Meticulous Providence is not a good reading of the biblical account of how God “governs” (or, “works in”) his Creation. In arguing this, I don’t want to fight “verse to verse combat” style; instead, I want to stand back and consider which reading of the overall biblical narrative is most consistent with the resultant worldviews that are generated by how individual verses have been used.

I am taking this approach because of what is called the Confirmation bias, which is the tendency to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's prior beliefs or values. People display this bias when they select information that supports their views, ignoring contrary information, or when they interpret ambiguous evidence as supporting their existing attitudes. The effect is strongest for desired outcomes, for emotionally charged issues, and for deeply entrenched beliefs. Confirmation bias is undefeatable for most people, but they can manage it, for example, by education and training in critical thinking skills. Confirmation bias is a result of automatic, unintentional strategies rather than deliberate deception.” (Wikipedia.) Two examples of the research illustrating confirmation bias.

- Does this research article support, or does it not support, a case for the death penalty.
- Was the officiating in this game of football biased against your team?

Is Meticulous Providence the Answer to the Problem of Evil and Suffering?

Three Questions for All Theologies:

1. Does this doctrine make you love God more?
2. Does this doctrine make you more faithful in your walk with Jesus?
3. Is this doctrine consistent with the general tone and narrative of Scripture?

Meticulous Provides fails the Good Theology Test:

1. **IMHO** The “fear of the Lord” is not a fear generated from God’s unpredictability (sometimes love, sometimes anger) or from God’s unreliability (sometimes good, sometimes evil). The “fear of the Lord,” which “is the beginning of wisdom (e.g., Proverbs 9:10), arises from the sense of wonder and awe we experience in the presence of the God who is Love. In this context, therefore, we find that God’s perfect love casts out the kind of fear that comes from feeling “unsafe” with God (1 John 4:18). A doctrine that promotes people to be “afraid” of how God might treat us does not glorify God. Helping people to know the God who is love, glorifies an awesome God.
 - 1.1. **God is Love.** This is more than a description of what God does (i.e., sometimes God is loving, sometimes God is something else), this is a bold declaration of who God is in God’s essential self. This is true and possible because the God who is before Space and Time, before Spirit and Matter, exists in a *perichoretic* union of three persons who are one. This defines the nature as the full and open embrace of the other. There is a universe of difference between three individuals with three wills finding a stable hierarchical relationship and a single embracing and being embraced relationship. We live in the universe of a Triune God who is love. God’s love is not coercive love, which is generated by combative wills seeking dominance, but genuine love, see 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.
 - 1.1.1. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable... Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.
 - 1.1.2. God is patient; God is kind; God is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. God does not insist on its own way; God is not irritable.... God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. The God who is love never ends.
 - 1.1.3. This material is treated in the sermon, “God is Love,” preached on 04 February 2024 at CBBC and is available online.
 - 1.2. **God creates from love and through love** by “making space” for somethings and someones other than Godself. (I got this description from Jürgen Moltmann, one of the so-called twentieth century “theologians of Hope.”) Creation is not primarily an extension of God’s will. Creating in love allows for genuine relationships, in which God humbly (an essential element of genuine love) makes room for another. That we are created in the image of God means, in part, that we are created to enter into genuine love relationships with God and others. Loving God and our neighbours, therefore, is not merely compliance with the Law and the Prophets, it is an essential component of being made “in the image of God.” We are only fully ourselves, we are only fully alive, when we are loving God and others. Each time we withhold love from God or from others (even if they are enemies) we are sinning by failing to worship God (i.e., failing to love God) and denying ourselves!
 - 1.2.1. God’s capacity to “empty himself” is, of course, demonstrated in the Incarnation. (Philippians 2)

- 1.2.2. The Great Command is “love God” (remembering that this is only possible because God first loved us, 1 John 4:19) and love our neighbours (Matthew 22:37-40). We are also commanded to love one another and to love our enemies. Those who love God, live in love.
- 1.2.3. “This is how God demonstrates his love for the world...” (John 3:16). The Cross (and the Atonement) is an expression of the LOVE of God rather than the WILL of God.
- 1.2.4. **It is less problematic to frame the human experience of Creation as genuine love than free will. Free will is a language of individuals, whereas genuine love is the language of persons in (or out or seeking) love.**
- 1.3. **God governs the world from love and through love.** God does not relate to (or “govern”) the world through exercising an eternal will that cannot be resisted. (It is the Daleks who threaten other life forms with the warning “resistance is futile!”). Rather, God governs the world in genuine love, which allows for the genuine freedom of the loved to refuse that love. Genuine love relationships are not coercive.
- 1.4. **The breaking of relationship, the hiding from love, is sin.** The cost of sin is not “a broken law” or a “dishonoured God”; the cost of sin is alienation from the God who loves us. (E.g., Adam and Eve hiding in the garden because they are ashamed.)
- 1.5. **God does not create Evil** as if evil was an intentional act of non-love. All of God’s acts of creation are from love. Even Satan’s story begins as a created and loved spirit. But Evil grows in the relational space God creates in order that Creation can genuinely receive love and genuinely give love. In this framework, Evil is not an accident (which would be the result of chaos) but the wilful refusal of God’s love. Sinning is the result of not leaning into God’s love and, instead, choosing acts of rebellion. The repeated acts of sinning lead to consequences that embed individual sins into social and cultural Sin, which gain power to become Evil. As God warns Cain, Sin becomes a wild beast crouching at our door, eager to control us (Gen 4:7). We have become the author of our own destruction. The only rescue, as all the Prodigals have discovered, is to return home to the love of God where there is forgiveness and healing.
- 1.6. **Evil grows in the spaces from which God is excluded.**
2. The biblical narrative encourages the view that God has left genuine relational space for us to act and react.
 - 2.1. We are consistently called upon to choose the way of God, “to walk by the Spirit,” and to resist temptation and Sin.
 - 2.2. The legitimacy of lament, grief, and righteous anger
 - 2.3. The unChristlikeness of accepting suffering and evil.
 - 2.4. The legitimacy of prayers and miracles.
3. The Reality of Evil
 - 3.1. The genuine existence of chaos, which must be destroyed in order for the *shalom* of the new heaven and earth to be established.
 - 3.2. The genuine existence of sin leads to the call to repentance and judgment.
 - 3.3. The genuine existence of principalities and powers, Babylon and Beasts, and Sin and Death leading to the Apocalypse and the final destruction of all powers that seek to dethrone God.
 - 3.4. This material is treated in the sermon, “Evil is Real 9but not forever),” preached on 11 February 2024 at CBBC and is available online.

Providence and Miracles

Introduction

1. “In the Bible, we do not find a neatly packaged doctrine of God’s sovereignty. The diversities of scripture show that this is a complex subject, fraught with subtlety, contradiction, and mystery” (Anderson). That the doctrine of providence must be inferred from narrative and doxological assertions means that the worldview of the interpreter has a creative role in its formation. (See, e.g., E. A. Johnson, “Does God Play Dice? Divine Providence and Chance,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 2-18.)
2. How worldviews shape the doctrine of Providence
 - 2.1. The theological doctrine of providence was formulated and developed within a cause/effect worldview. Under the influence of Aristotle and Greek philosophy, God was assumed to be the necessary prime mover of all actions in an otherwise motionless world and so everything that existed did so as a direct expression of his will.
 - 2.2. Under the influence of Newtonian physics and the modern Western world, the world of cause/effect was understood as a mechanical relationship – for atheists this removed the need for a god and for (some) Christian theists this meant that God must (again) be identified as the first cause of all things.
 - 2.3. However, advances in understanding the created order have opened up new possibilities for understanding the relationship of God to the world: a relationship which allows for genuine freedom without anarchy. The developing picture of quantum physics reveal a “dynamic, open-ended view of the world in which some events are in principle unpredictable, although in retrospect they make sense” (Johnson).
 - 2.3.1. The Heisenberg uncertainty principal suggests that there is an “ontological indeterminacy in reality itself... [T]he fundamental building blocks of the world are neither mechanically pre-programmed nor utterly chaotic, but spontaneous within an orderly system” (Johnson). This raises the questions of foreknowledge and the nature of time.
 - 2.3.2. Chaos theory highlights the seeming randomness of interconnected events even in a seemingly ordered system. It is not just that the system is too complex for us to understand them, it is that they are inherently unknowable, i.e., chaotic.
 - 2.3.3. The laws of nature “are now understood to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, that is, abstract descriptions read off from regularities in the universe that approximate what we observe, rather than rules which preexist platonically apart from the universe, operating to dictate or enforce behaviour” (Johnson).
3. This worldview, suggested by quantum physics, allows us to give full weight to the biblical evidence that God both (1) governs his creation *teleologically* (towards a purpose) and (2) relates to his creation (particularly humanity) as genuine subjects rather than as merely objects of his will.
4. Baptist Theologian, Stanley Grenz, takes account of this new way of seeing Creation, to describe God’s governance of the world. “With the demise of the older physics, the classical understanding of preservation has...lost its credibility... **‘Preservation’** constitutes the Christian answer to the question of the meaning of the whole. We confess that God provides the only ultimate meaning of creation. In doing so, he prevents the universe and its history from slipping into meaninglessness... In the final analysis, **‘concurrence’** is faith’s answer to the question, ‘Who is Ultimate?’ ... When we assert that God **‘governs’** his creation, we are expressing our certainty that God will bring both the world as a whole and our lives to their final goal... God governs the world in that he brings good out of evil,

whether partially in this life or fully in the eschatological new creation... Hope is possible, for God will bring his purposes to pass and is using even the evils of life in this process. This is the message of the doctrine of providence" (*Theology for the Community of God*).

- 4.1. This opens up the possibility of Theistic Evolution, in which the means of evolution work towards the purposes of God – a creation that can be loved and that can love – rather than evolution being valueless and random.
5. "Providence often has a scandalous appearance. Babies are massacred in Bethlehem with no one to rescue them. God's Son cries in agony in Gethsemane and from the cross – and hears silence. God's heart is broken, but he does not act in the hoped for way. There is something posing a threat to God's rule, to a certain extent limiting what God can do as ruler of the world. Therefore, God does not now eliminate suffering but redeems by means of it" (Pinnock, *Flame of Love*).
- 5.1. God's way of love necessitates the genuine responses of others, which leads to a world that suffers and a world in which Evil/sin/chaos can push against God's good will for all people. But this is not a God who has "lost control," for God works in and through love to bring good out of suffering and thus bring his Creation to wholeness.

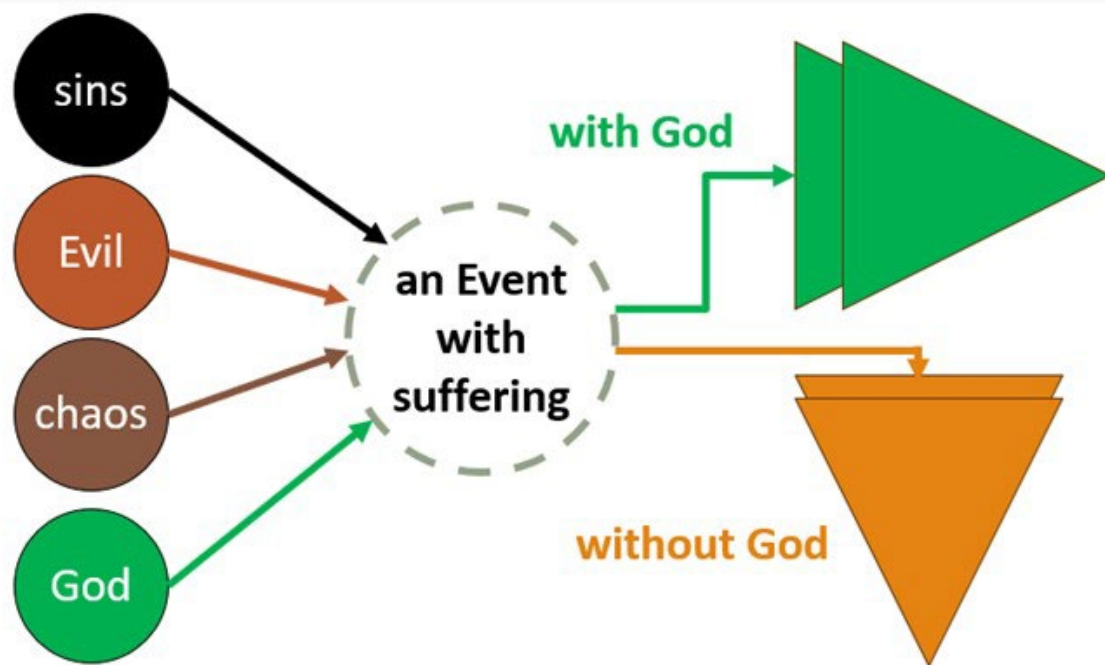
Distinguishing Providence and Miracles

1. Providence is what we call God's broad governance of his creation. Miracles are occasional, direct intervention by God in a particular event. These interventions often appear to counter God's general providence, which works through "natural laws," and, therefore, are considered to be "supranatural."
 - 1.1. Gaining a better understanding of the "natural laws" does not mean that there is less "need" for God's providence, for God's providence works within and in concert with God's acts of creation.
 - 1.2. Miracles result from natural forces being countered by supernatural force. Miracles as genuinely extranatural but without being antinatural.
 - 1.3. Nicholas Saunders distinguishes between General Divine Action (GDA) and Special Divine Action (SDA), the former we might call providence and the latter miracles (Divine Action and Modern Science).
 - 1.3.1. GDA: "Those actions of God that pertain to the whole of creation universally and simultaneously. These include actions such as the initial creation and the maintenance of scientific regularity and the laws of nature by God."
 - 1.3.2. SDA: "Those actions of God that pertain to a particular time and place in creation as distinct from another. This is a broad category and includes the traditional understanding of 'miracles,' the notion of particular providence, responses to intercessionary prayer, God's personal actions, and some forms of religious experiences."
2. What Sort of Person are You? In *Signs*, the 2008 movie written and directed by M. Night Shyamal, Rev. Graham Hess (played by Mel Gibson) believes there are two type of people in the world: those who believe that events that happen to us are "signs" of a divine benevolence and those who believe that they are chance events and we are all alone. This either/or view has led him to lose his faith following the tragic death of his wife. His faith is restored as he begins to make connections between the death of his wife and actions necessary to save his family from aliens.
3. "It is clear that orthodox Christians cannot accept a world view with its suspicion of miracles. Belief in miracles lies at the heart of authentic Christian faith. Without the miracle of the first Easter, Christianity would no doubt long since have passed from the scene" (Spiceland, *EDT*).

4. In the Gospels, two different “reasons” for miracles are highlighted through the use of two different Greek words – “deeds of power” (*dynamis*, mostly Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and “signs” (*semeion*, mostly John). (A third word, “wonder, marvel” (*thauma*) draws attention to the effect upon the viewer of the miracle.
 - 4.1. As signs, miracles point to the divine mission of Jesus and to the glory God. “They are intended to bring the glory and love of God into bold relief. They are intended ... to draw a person’s attention away from the mundane events of everyday life and direct it towards the mighty acts of God” (Spiceland, EDT).
 - 4.2. As deeds of power, miracles often represent a power conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. A conflict that God always wins.
 - 4.3. In addition, miracles can be acts of kindness intended to meet human needs.
5. Miracles in the Bible cluster around key moments in the history of Salvation (e.g., Exodus, Jesus), which are often times of high conflict between light and darkness.
 - 5.1. The Book of Acts contains accounts of “signs and wonders,” but they remain marvellous because they are uncommon within the life of a church expanding across the Roman Empire in a 30 year time period.
6. The providence of God is often devalued in our desire to experience a miracle of God. Yet, God is the giver of every good gift (James 1:17). Providential care is as much the active work of God as a miracle.
7. We are encouraged to pray for God’s interventions in our lives, “Ask. Seek. Knock.” (Matthew 7:7-14) James 4:2-3 presents an interesting mix of encouragement and challenge, “Yet you don’t have what you want because you don’t ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don’t get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.”

The Work of God in a World of Suffering

1. What I want to emphasise is “outcome” rather than “process” or, even, “event”.
2. The Bible is filled with examples of God’s people who are upset with God because they take the experience of suffering and evil as evidence that God is failing to love them. It is God’s ongoing care of me, his promise that I will never walk alone, and his assurance that he knows where we are going that undergirds my faith in him.
3. I cannot declare that evil will not come my way, nor can I say that evil is not evil for me. What I can, and do, affirm is that “in all things God works for the blessing of those who continue to hold his hand in the darkness rather than turn from him in fear and disappointment.”



Summary: What are the Basics, the non-negotiables, of a Spence view of Providence

1. God acts in self-determining freedom.
2. God is relational, and always chooses to act in a way consistent with his character.
3. In making humans in his own image, God has granted us libertarian freedom.
4. The future is open; what we choose to do matters. We live in the possibilities of the future, not determined by the decrees of the past.
5. God is Sovereign, even when his will is not done. There are risks, but the outcomes are not uncertain.
6. There is no meticulous providence, but God continues to be present and to work in all things for the good of his people.

Exploring Some Case Studies

A Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Providence of God

“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17).

Father of lights,

You are constant and consistent, eternally faithful and true.

Your mercy is generously bestowed upon all the earth, from the slug to the sluggard!

You give because you love, you love because you are.

We neither earn it nor deserve it. And, usually, we don't even acknowledge it.

Today we acknowledge it.

Today we give thanks for your uninterrupted preservation of all things.

Even while chaos struggles to overcome order and our lives unravel and fray

You continue to give structure and meaning to all things.

Today we give you thanks for a good world filled with serendipitous delights.

Today we give thanks for your unceasing work that brings all things to their rightful fruition.

Even while we reject your right to rule and resist your loving guidance,

You provide us with a world of beauty and joy.

We acknowledge that you are the Creator, the Source of life and light.

As we daily live within your life and light, we give you our thanks – insufficient though it may be.

You are the giver of every good gift.

You are the craftsman of each blessing that surprisingly emerges from the formless pains of evil.

You are the God of order and purpose.

Father of lights,

We give you our thanks on behalf of those who accept your goodness without acknowledgement.

We give you our thanks as an expression of our lives entrusted into your care.

Amen.