

THE MYSTERIOUS HAND OF PROVIDENCE

I use the word ‘mysterious’ not in its biblical sense of ‘*something hidden until revealed.*’ I use it in our every-day sense of ‘*something secret, incapable of being explained, obscure, puzzling.*’ This morning I would like us to look at God’s hidden hand behind all of life.

Definition

“Providence is that continuous agency of God by which he makes all the events of the physical and moral universe fulfill the original design with which he created it.” [A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 419] Major points: (gleaned from Strong’s *Theology*, pp 419-425)

- Providence is not to be taken merely in the sense of *fore-seeing*. It is *for-seeing* also, or **a positive agency** in connection with all the events of history. The Germans have the word *Fürscheidung*, *for-seeing*, *looking out for*, as well as the word *Vorsehung*, *fore-seeing*, *seeing beforehand*. Our word ‘providence’ embraces the meaning of both these words. **The sense is that providence is not passive, merely a ‘looking ahead through time’ but rather is active, actually guiding and directing events.**
- Providence is to be distinguished from preservation. Preservation concerns the maintaining of the existence and powers of created things while **providence is an actual care and control of them.**
- Since the original plan of God is all-comprehending, the providence which executes the plan is all-comprehending also, embracing within its scope things small and great. **Providence is God’s attention concentrated everywhere. His care is microscopic as well as telescopic.** ‘Nothing is too high or low, Too mean or mighty, if God wills it so.’
- Since Christ is the only Revealer of God and the medium of every divine activity, providence is to be regarded as the work of Christ. **“These problems of God’s providential dealings are intelligible only when we consider that Christ is the revealer of God, and that his suffering for sin opens to us the heart of God. All history is the progressive manifestation of Christ’s holiness and love, and in the cross we have the key that unlocks the secret of the universe. With the cross in view, we can believe that Love rules over all, and that ‘all things work together for good to them that love God’ (Rom 8:28).”**
- In respect to the good acts of men, providence embraces all those natural influences of birth and surroundings which prepare men for the operation of God’s word and Spirit, and which constitute motives to obedience.
- In respect to the evil acts of men, providence is never the efficient cause of sin but is:
 - **Preventive** — God by his providence prevents sin which would otherwise be committed. That he thus prevents sin is to be regarded as grace and not a matter of obligation. Means by which this may be accomplished could be as mundane as parents, government, church, traditions, customs, laws, age, disease, and even death (for example, men at 60 years of age are 8x less likely to commit crime than at the age of 25; passion has subsided, fear of punishment has increased). Examples: *“And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.”* – Gen 20:6. *“Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.”* – Ps 76:10.
 - **Permissive** — God permits men to cherish and to manifest the evil dispositions of their hearts. God’s permissive providence is simply the negative act of withholding impediments from the path of the sinner, instead of preventing his sin by the exercise of divine power. It implies no ignorance, passivity, or indulgence, but consists with hatred of the sin and determination to punish it. **Because even the acts of the wicked enter into God’s plan, the Hebrew writers sometimes represented God as doing what he merely permitted finite spirits to do.** See the example below with David numbering Israel. Examples: *“God left [Hezekiah], to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart.”* – 2 Chron 32:31. *“Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him”* – Isa 53:10.
 - **Directive** — God directs the evil acts of men to ends unforeseen and unintended by its agents. When evil is in the heart and will certainly come out, God orders its flow in one direction rather than in another, so that its course can be best controlled and fulfil his purposes. This is sometimes called overruling providence. Sin is like the lava of the volcano which will certainly come out but which God directs in its course down the mountain-side so that it will fulfil his will. The gravitation downward is due to man’s evil will, the direction to this side or to that is due to God’s providence. **Thus the very passions which excite men to rebel against God are made completely subservient to his purposes.** Examples: Joseph being sold into Egypt: *“But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.”* – Gen 50:20. *“O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few.... Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks.”* – Isa 10:5-7,12. *“If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him: but if a man sin against the LORD, who shall intreat for him? Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the LORD would slay them.”* — 1 Sam 2:25b. *“And Absalom and all the men of Israel said, The counsel of*

Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel. For the LORD had appointed to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, to the intent that the LORD might bring evil upon Absalom.” – 2 Sam 17:14. “Wherefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against Amaziah, and he sent unto him a prophet, which said unto him, Why hast thou sought after the gods of the people, which could not deliver their own people out of thine hand? And it came to pass, as he talked with him, that the king said unto him, Art thou made of the king’s counsel? forbear; why shouldst thou be smitten? Then the prophet forbore, and said, **I know that God hath determined to destroy thee, because thou hast done this, and hast not hearkened unto my counsel.**” — 2 Chron 25:15,16

■ **Determinative** — God determines the bounds reached by the evil passions of his creatures, and the measure of their efforts. Since moral evil is a germ capable of indefinite expansion, God’s determining the measure of its growth does not alter its character or involve God’s complicity with the perverse wills which cherishes it. “The union of God’s will and man’s will is such that, while in one view all can be ascribed to God, in another all can be ascribed to the creature. But how God and the creature are united in operation is doubtless known and knowable only to God. A very dim analogy is furnished in the union of the soul and body in men. The hand retains its own physical laws, yet is obedient to the human will. This theory recognizes the veracity of consciousness in its witness to personal freedom, and yet the completeness of God’s control of both the bad and the good. Free beings are ruled, but are rules as free and in their freedom. The freedom is not sacrificed to the control. The two coexist, each in its integrity. Any doctrine which does not allow this is false to Scripture and destructive of religion.” Examples: “*And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand.... And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life.*” – Job 1:12; 2:6. “*There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*” – 1 Cor 10:13. “*For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming*” – 2 Thes 2:7,8.

David Numbering Israel

How are we to view life? I believe we can take a glimpse into life as we look at David’s sin in numbering Israel. The question I want to ask is this: who is fault was it that David took the census of Israel against the will of the Lord? Who is to blame for that incident? Consider:

“And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel.” – 1 Chron 21:1

Who is to blame for David numbering Israel? In one sense, Satan is to blame.

“And David said to Joab and to the rulers of the people, Go, number Israel from Beersheba even to Dan; and bring the number of them to me, that I may know it. And Joab answered, The LORD make his people an hundred times so many more as they be: but, my Lord the king, are they not all my lord’s servants? why then doth my Lord require this thing? why will he be a cause of trespass to Israel? Nevertheless the king’s word prevailed against Joab.” — 1 Chron 21:2-4

“And God was displeased with this thing; therefore he smote Israel. And David said unto God, I have sinned greatly, because I have done this thing; but now, I beseech thee, do away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly.” — 1 Chron 21:7,8

Who is to blame for David numbering Israel? Yes, Satan was involved but here we also see it was David to blame. He and he alone commanded the census to be done. David was responsible. But is that all?

“And again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah.” — 2 Sam 24:1

There is another very real sense in which God was involved and behind the numbering of Israel (I believe it would be saying too much to state ‘God was to blame’). I realize there are those who will reject this; the Bible I am using this morning even has a center-column reference which explains ‘he’ = ‘Satan’ and then makes reference to 1 Chron 21:1. Here are how some other translations try to get around the inference that the Lord was behind the incident:

“Now again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah.’” — 2 Sam 24:1 NASV; note the original ASV has ‘he’ instead of ‘it’

“And the anger of Jehovah addeth to burn against Israel, and [an adversary] moveth David about them, saying, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah.’” — 2 Sam 24:1 Young’s Literal Translation

But to do this, in my mind, destroys the direct reading of the passage. I would be more in agreement with the sense as captured in the New Living Translation:

“Once again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he caused David to harm them by taking a census. ‘Go and count the people of Israel and Judah,’ the Lord told him.” — 2 Sam 24:1 New Living Translation

JOHN GILL — I must admit surprise as I considered the comments from John Gill on this verse: “*And he moved David against them*; not the Lord, but Satan, as may be supplied from 1 Chron xxi. 1; or *it moved him*; the anger of the Lord, ... or the heart of David, ... that is, the evil imaginations of his heart; ... the Lord left him to the corruptions of his nature, sometimes called Satan, 2 Cor xii. 7; which wrought powerfully in him, and stirred up to take a step contrary to the interest of Israel.” [John Gill’s Commentary, vol 2 p 311] John Gill would have been the last person I would have imagined to have taken such a stance.

KEIL & DELITZSCH — I believe these comments from Keil and Delitzsch are more accurate: “The subject to ‘*moved*’ is Jehovah, and the words ‘*against them*’ point back to Israel. ***Jehovah instigated David against Israel to the performance of an act which brought down a severe judgment upon the nation.*** With regards to the idea that God instigates to sin, see the remarks on 1 Sam xxvi 19. In the parallel text of the Chronicles, Satan is mentioned as the tempter to evil, through whom Jehovah led David to number the people.” [K&D, vol 2 ‘The Books of Samuel’ p 503]

K&D’s reference back to 1 Sam 26:19 is the incident where David confronts Saul after sneaking into the camp of Saul and leaving with Saul’s spear and water jug: “***These passages also show that God only instigates those who have sinned against Him to evil deeds; and therefore that the instigation consists in the fact that God impels sinners to manifest the wickedness of their hearts in deeds, or furnishes the opportunity and occasion for the unfolding and practical manifestation of the evil desires of the heart, that the sinner may either be brought to the knowledge of his more evil ways and also to repentance, through the evil deed and its consequences, or, if the heart should be hardened still more by the evil deed, that it may become ripe for the judgment of death. The instigation of a sinner to evil is simply one peculiar way in which God, as a general rule, punishes sins through sinners; for God only instigates to evil actions such as have drawn down the wrath of God upon themselves in consequence of their sin.***” [K&D, vol 2 ‘The Books of Samuel’ p 252]

The Crucifixion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

The same mystery might be found as we consider the crucifixion. As we look at the cross, Satan was again involved:

“*Then entered Satan into Judas surnamed Iscariot, being of the number of the twelve.*” — Luke 22:3

“*And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him*” — John 13:2

“*Jesus answered, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. And after the sop Satan entered into him. Then said Jesus unto him, That thou doest, do quickly.*” — John 13:26,27

Wescott makes this comment on Jesus’ command to Judas: “The command is not to do the deed as if that were any longer uncertain, but to do in a particular way what is actually being done.” [Wescott, *Gospel According to John*, p157] A. H. Strong uses this as an example of the ‘directive’ providence of God. [Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p424]

Moving along in the same manner as before, who else is to blame for the crucifixion?

“*Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him ... ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain*” — Acts 2:22,23

“*The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go. But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; and killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses.*” — Acts 3:13-15

“*Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole.*” — Acts 4:10

“*And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together*” — Acts 4:24–27

Without question the responsibility for the crucifixion of our Lord lay with those who actually denied Him and put him on the cross. They will answer for their sin. Yet through all these actions, the will of God was being accomplished:

“*Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain*” — Acts 2:22,23

“*And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made*

heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for **to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.**” — Acts 4:24–28

<i>Satan</i>	<i>Man</i>	<i>God</i>
Satan tempts and deceives	mankind makes decisions and choices	behind it all is the providential hand of God
we must understand we are in a spiritual warfare with the enemy of our souls	we are responsible for our choices; Satan or the providence of God may never be used as an excuse	The mysterious hand of providence does not remove any accountability from Satan nor man. This providence oversees all activities and determines the outcome.

WE MUST MAINTAIN A PROPER BALANCE BETWEEN THESE THREE TRUTHS! While we are responsible for all our choices, activities, plans and actions, our ultimate faith rests in God, not our plans or actions.

Practical Applications

- Some of the best theological advice I have ever received is this: ***NEVER lay sin at the feet of God***
- Providence teaches ***there is no such thing as ‘luck’***. God sees and knows all things, therefore there may be times when providences may appear against an individual regardless of how much we attempt to help. In the words of Pastor Fisher, ‘there may be things in a person’s life that the Lord sees which we cannot’ (this does not however give us the right to ‘give up’ on anyone).
- ***The main desire of our hearts should be to be pure in His eyes, even if misunderstood by others.*** Circumstances may temporarily paint us a bad picture but God knows; what else matters?
- Since the ultimate outcome of anything we do rests upon the Lord, ***we must keep all plans and choices consistent with the will of God*** (contra “*the ends justify the means*”)
- ***Our eyes should be upon the Lord, trusting Him for the outcome.*** This emphasizes the importance of prayer and our relationship with the Lord. Young people: one practical application might be your future spouse. Some young people spend their time seeking for their future spouse. It would be wiser to seek the will of God in their lives and allow the Lord to provide the spouse.
- Nationally, as we consider this Fourth of July 2009, our nation is great and powerful. But we as a nation have turned our backs upon the Lord and many trust in our weapons. Time and time again history has shown the battle does not always go to the strong:

David and Goliath

Micaiah prophesied against Ahab that he was to die in battle; Ahab thus disguised himself yet ‘a certain man drew a bow at a venture and smote the king’ (1 Kings 22:17,30,34)

Sennacherib against Jerusalem & Hezekiah; the death angel killed 185,000 in one night

King Ahasuerus could not sleep and therefore had the records read, part of which included Mordecai’s service and led to the salvation of the Jews under Esther (Esther 6:1)

a storm destroyed the Spanish Armada and thus saved England from the Papacy in 1588

a storm dispersed the French fleet gathered for the conquest of New England, this storm occurred on a day set aside for fasting and prayer by the Puritans to avert such a calamity. (~1640's ?)

Napoleon’s plans was frustrated and his army destroyed in Russia due to the unusually early commencement of cold weather in 1812

The **Battle of Gettysburg** (July 1-3, 1863) is a veritable gold mine of providential occurrences. Maj Gen J. E. B. Stuart’s calvary was delayed in arriving north to support Gen Robert E. Lee, thus depriving Lee of vital information on the Union forces which might have prevented the Battle of Gettysburg from ever occurring. Stonewall Jackson died May 10, 1863 as a result of a wound received at Chancellorsville. His absence as well as the re-structuring of the Confederate Army greatly effected the outcome at Gettysburg less than two months later. Lt Gen Richard Ewell decided against taking Cemetery Hill on the first day of action, depriving the Confederates of the high ground in the north of the campaign (many historians argue Jackson would have taken the hill and the entire outcome of the battle would have been different). Col Joshua Chamberlain maintained the left flank of the Union Corp at Little Round Top on the second day of battle which won him the Congressional Medal of Honor. But the battle was also effected by the fact that the Alabama forces fighting up the hill against him had just

endured a twenty-mile forced march to arrive at Gettysburg in time. The Confederate forces were immediately thrust into battle without even the chance to refresh themselves with water (this is not to disparage the heroism or persistence of the men at Little Round Top). Col William Oates commanded the Alabamians and said later,

“His [Col. Chamberlain’s] skill and persistency and the great bravery of his men saved Little Round Top and the Army of the Potomac from defeat. [If one more Confederate regiment had stormed the far left of the Army of the Potomac with the 15th Alabama,] ...we would have completely turned the flank and have won Little Round Top, which would have forced Meade’s whole left wing to retire.’ He concluded, philosophically, that *‘great events sometimes turn on comparatively small affairs.’* [LaFantasie, Glenn W., *Gettysburg Requiem: The Life of William C. Oates*]

The final day was fraught with ‘coincidences’. Maj Gen Edward Johnson’s attack on Culp’s Hill was meant to divert some of the forces from the center of the Union lines but accidentally occurred too early to be effective as a diversion. Lt Gen James Longstreet disagreed with Lee’s tactics from the beginning and hesitated his commands with what some say was a ‘childish display of sulking’, possibly costing Maj Gen George Pickett his division during the failed frontal attack. Much more could be added but any changes in one or more of these events could have given the Confederates the victory and thus would have changed the entire history of our nation.

The Battle of Midway (June 4-7, 1942) is hailed as the most important Naval Battle in the Pacific during World War II. In that battle the United States won its first naval victory against Japan and turned the entire tide of the war in our favor. Initially set as a trap against the United States, codebreakers in late May discovered key elements which allowed our forces to discover the Japanese intentions and thus turn the trap against the Japanese. What would have been the outcome of WW2 if the codebreakers had not discovered the secrets literally weeks before a major offensive?

“Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God.” – Ps 20:7

“The horse is prepared against the day of battle: but safety is of the LORD.” – Prov 21:31