

Hold Fast: The Forgotten Truths We Must Always Remember

God Is Sovereign

Selected Scriptures

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Well, we're taking a break from our study through the Book of Romans just for the summer. We're looking at those truths that are very important to us as believers, in fact, are foundational, and yet have been largely forgotten in today's church. We've already looked at several of them. We want to look at another today.

This is important, because the battle between God and Satan happens primarily in the human mind. There is a battle every day waged for your mind. If you're in Christ, you have the Holy Spirit, and He is daily renewing your mind through the Word. You're coming to think God's thoughts. You're coming to see things from His perspective.

But at the same time, we live in a world system, and it's very easy for us to be influenced by the mindset of the age in which we live. Paul warned us about this in Romans 12:2. He said, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." It's interesting the Greek words he uses there in the warning not to be conformed to the thinking of the age. Literally, we could translate it like this: don't allow the mindset of your age to force you into its mold; don't allow the culture to shape your thinking.

Now this happens, unfortunately, often in our lives as believers. One of the ways, one of the common examples, is how we come to view the events and circumstances and details of our lives. There are philosophies, explanations, for this out in the world at large, and we can be influenced by them. Let me give you some of the more common explanations for why things happen in the world. See if you've been influenced by these things.

First of all, there's the viewpoint that says natural processes alone are responsible for the things that happen in the world. This is naturalistic determinism. You'll hear them using expressions like "nature" and "the laws of nature" determine what happens to us. B.F. Skinner taught that all human behavior is ultimately controlled by either genetic or environmental factors. You hear this popularized in expressions like "well, he just can't help it; he can't help himself;" that's just the

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way he is or the way she is; the environment made them as they are.”

A second explanation that’s very common is fate or fatalism or determinism. This philosophy teaches that an unbroken chain of prior actions determines every event, including how you think and how you behave. Past actions, this philosophy says, have unalterably determined every detail of your life, and you can do nothing to change it. This is obviously a very dark philosophy. It’s most popularly expressed in vulgar bumper stickers that say “[Expletive] Happens” or something like “Life is an [expletive], and then you die.” It’s fate.

A third common philosophy out there about why things happen is random chance, or casualism. Our lives, this philosophy says, are the result of random events strung together by mere mathematical probability. Life is inherently random. By the way, this is not new. This is an old philosophy. You can find it in the Philistines, the enemies of Israel in the time of David. First Samuel 6:9, says, maybe this “happened to us by chance.” It’s been around a long time.

A fourth philosophy that deals with the question of the cause of the events and circumstances that happen is self-determinism. a very popular viewpoint. My life, this viewpoint says, is the result of my own will, my own decisions—solely. I am in control. I can be anything I want to be. To will it is to make it so. Believe in yourself (is the mantra of this viewpoint), and there’s no limit to your potential. In this worldview self-confidence is the greatest virtue. And our world is filled with it.

Tragically, if you look at those very common explanations, these flawed philosophies have profoundly influenced the thinking of God’s people even within the church. Today’s church has largely forgotten a foundational truth to which our forefathers held strongly, and that is that God is Sovereign over all things. It is a forgotten truth that we must always remember, and to which we must always hold fast. The doctrine of God’s sovereignty or, ultimately, His providence (they’re hand in glove as I’ll describe in a moment), this is foundational, because if God isn’t in charge, then God isn’t God.

R.C. Sproul, in an unforgettable way, explained this to a first-year class of seminary students. He went into a classroom, and he read this statement from the Westminster Confession of Faith. It also appears in the Baptist Confession of Faith. Here’s what he read. “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”

And then he asked for a vote. He asked the students, he said, alright, how many of you believe that's true? And about a third of these first-year seminary students raised their hands. He said, alright, how many of you are atheists? And of course, understandably, no hand went up. To which R.C. then said, some of you aren't voting.

Now, why would he have said that? Because those are the only two options. Either you're an atheist, and you don't believe God exists, or if you believe God exists, by the very nature of who God is, He must be Sovereign over all things. That's what it means to be God. If there is one stray molecule anywhere in the universe, then God isn't really God, because eventually that molecule through a series of circumstances could lead to the unseating of God. It's like the old adage:

For lack of a nail the shoe was lost.
For lack of a shoe the horse was lost.
For lack of a horse the rider was lost.
For lack of a rider the battle was lost.
For lack of the battle the war was lost.
For lack of the war the kingdom was lost.

All it takes is one little thing to start a series of events that eventually have huge ramifications. Not one stray molecule. You know, it's crucial that we understand this doctrine because of the practical help that it brings us in the circumstances of our lives. Many of you came here this morning with serious troubles in your life, serious trials and difficulties. I promise you, there is no truth that will be more comforting to you than the truth that we'll study together this morning. On the other hand, it's important because this is so foundational to our faith. It's foundational to the concept of God Himself.

Now, as we study the doctrine of God's sovereignty and His providence together this morning, I want to consider several key questions. Let's start with this one. What is providence? What is providence? Sovereignty, by the way, is what God is; providence is what He does. It's the expression of His sovereignty in everyday life.

The English word "providence" comes from two Latin words: "pro" meaning "before," and the word from which we get the word "video," meaning "to see, to see before." But providence is so much more than that.

Even the English dictionary acknowledges that. Listen to its definition: “Providence [it says] is a careful arrangement prepared beforehand for the accomplishment of predetermined ends.”

That’s not bad as it goes, but I like the English Puritan Thomas Watson’s definition better. He writes, “Providence is God’s ordering all issues and events of everything after the counsel of His own will to His own glory.”

Or there’s Louis Berkhof, in his Systematic Theology, who writes that Providence is “that continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed ends.”

You see, in creation, God speaks all things into being. We saw that in Psalm 33 this morning. In “providence,” God does two things. First of all, He preserves all the things that He created. He preserves them. He sustains them. In Psalm 36:6, the psalmist writes to God, “You preserve man and beast.” God preserves us. Colossians 1:17, speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ, says, “In Him all things hold together.” We could put it in a different way. We could say Jesus Christ holds all things together.

Hebrews 1:3 makes the same point of Christ. “He ... upholds all things by the word of His power.” Just as God (blowing sound made) spoke all things into being, He sustains all things by the word of His mouth: Let it stand, let it be, and it is. In Acts 17:28, we read, “In [God] we live and move and exist.” Listen, everything exists and continues to exist as a result of the exercise of God’s divine will. He wills it to exist. He preserves it.

But there’s a second part of Providence. Not only does God preserve all the things that He created, but secondly, He governs all the things He created to ensure that the purposes for which He created them are in fact accomplished. This is the primary use of the word “Providence.”

Now, we’re going to look at a number of texts, but I want to show you a foundational statement of this truth in Psalm 135. Look at Psalm 135. It’s a Psalm that contrasts the true and living God against the false gods that are in the world. And here’s a major point of contrast. Verse 5, Psalm 135:5: “For I know that [Yahweh] The true God, the God of the Old Testament, the God in the New Testament who reveals Himself in His Son. “I know that [Yahweh] is great and that our Lord is above all gods.” Nobody measures up to God.

How do you define great? Here it is in verse 6, “Whatever [Yahweh] pleases, He does.” Think

about that for a moment. Whatever God wants to do, He does. And there's no limit on that. Notice verse 6 continues, "In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps." That's a poetic way to say there isn't one place in the universe, there's not one dark corner where God doesn't do what He pleases to do.

Now when we think about Providence, there are two potential misunderstandings that I want to make sure, right out of the gate, we don't go astray in pursuing. Providence does not deny that you and I make real decisions, that we really act. Providence doesn't teach that we're robots. No, we really do think. We really do make decisions. We really do act. And Providence doesn't deny that. Nor does Providence deny that God has established natural laws that govern our universe, laws that we call gravity, and the hydrological cycle, and so forth. Providence doesn't deny the existence of those "secondary causes" as theologians call them. Rather, Providence teaches that God superintends these secondary causes to guarantee that His will is accomplished.

It's hard for us to understand how those things interact. I think the best illustration of how they interact was at the cross. Turn to Acts 2. Listen to how Peter explains it. Acts 2:23. He says of Christ, "This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God." [God had a plan. He predetermined the cross would happen. The cross happened because God willed it to be so. But God wasn't the only one exercising His will at the cross.] Notice verse 23 continues, "You nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and [you] put Him to death." So, who was responsible for the death of Christ? Was it God, or was it sinful people? The answer is yes. They were both acting. They were both making real decisions.

Turn over to chapter 4. You see this again in the prayer of the apostles. Verse 27, "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel." They all were against Christ. They all were angry with Christ. They were envious of Christ. They wanted Christ dead for their own selfish reasons. They willed Christ's death, and they worked to execute it. That was their decision. But it wasn't just their decision, verse 28, because ultimately they did "whatever Your hand and Your [purposed] predestined to occur."

You see, the point of Providence is this: God takes all the contingencies, He takes all the secondary causes, He takes all the free decisions of people and angels, and He weaves them together with His own eternal will to ensure that ultimately His purpose is accomplished. This is Providence.

Now that brings us to a second question. Why is Providence necessary? What compels God to orchestrate everything that happens in the world? There are two answers to that question. First of all, because of His nature, because of God's absolute sovereignty, Psalm 103:19, says this, "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all."

Psalm 33:11 we read just a few minutes ago: "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation." God is Sovereign. That is what He is. He, by nature of the definition of God, is the One who reigns, the One who rules. Providence is what He does. It is the outworking of His sovereignty in the affairs and the details of life. Sadly, many Christians are more than happy to have God Sovereign, but they don't particularly like when He starts messing around with the details of their lives. That's Providence. God is Sovereign over all things, and He works out that sovereignty through Providence.

There's a second reason Providence is necessary. Not only because of His sovereignty, but because of God's eternal plan. Theologians call God's eternal plan His "eternal decree." Is there biblical evidence for such a plan? Absolutely. Turn to Ephesians 3. Paul references it in passing here in Ephesians 3. Ephesians 3. He's been talking about his ministry and about Christ and the mystery of Christ and the Church. And then he says this in verse 11 of Ephesians 3. All of this is "in accordance with the eternal purpose."

Notice the marginal note in the NAS. In the margin, there you see it says, literally, "the purpose of the ages." He says, all that I'm telling you in my ministry is in keeping with God's plan of the ages "which He carried out in Jesus Christ our Lord." So, what is the plan of the ages? Well, we really saw it last week when we looked at the theme of the Bible: God is redeeming a people, by His Son, for His Son, to His own glory.

But Paul develops it in Ephesians 1. Go back to chapter 1. I wish I had time to walk you through verses 3 to 14. I don't, so let me give you the big picture. Here in this section Paul unfolds God's eternal plan. Let me just summarize it for you. God's eternal plan we could reduce to these three points.

Number one. God, as part of His eternal plan, sovereignly redeems His elect. This is what He wanted to do. He wanted to redeem His elect. Verse 4, "He chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him." He goes on. "In love He predestined." He predetermined our destiny. What destiny? "To [be adopted] as sons ... according to the kind intention of His will," Verse 7 goes on to say, "In [Christ] we have

redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.” This was God’s plan, to redeem His elect through the work of His Son.

But that wasn’t all the eternal plan included. It also included a reference to Jesus Christ. In verse 10 we learned that part of God’s eternal plan was to ultimately bring everything under Jesus Christ. Notice verse 10. The administration of God’s eternal plan was to sum up “all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on the earth.” Ultimately the eternal plan is to bring everything that exists under Jesus Christ. Now why? Why did God do this?

What was the driving force behind this eternal plan? Verse 6, it was “to the praise of the glory of His grace.” Verse 12, it was “to the praise of His glory.” Verse 14, it was “to the praise of His glory.” There’s the eternal plan of God: to redeem the elect, to elevate Christ, and to do it to exalt His own glory.

Now, how does He accomplish that eternal plan? Look at verse 11, the middle of verse 11. We have been “predestined [notice how God’s described] according to [God’s] purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.” You see, God has to providentially direct everything in order to accomplish His great, eternal plan.

A.A. Hodge writes, “The human race is preserved, continents and islands are settled with inhabitants, nations are elevated to empire, civilization and liberty are advanced, [Why?] that the Church, the Lamb’s bride, may be perfected in all her members and adorned for her husband.”

Listen, God has a great, eternal plan. And although it includes as part of that plan what happens in Washington DC and Moscow, that’s not the most important part of God’s plan. The most important part includes people like you and me sitting in churches like this, because He’s getting a bride for His Son. That’s the plan. So, fueled by God’s absolute sovereignty and His eternal plan, God preserves everything He made, and He directs it to ensure that it accomplishes His divine ends.

So, we’ve answered the question, what is Providence? And secondly, why is it necessary? The next question that arises naturally is, how far does God’s control extend? Or we could put it this way: what does God’s providence control? Well, we’ve already established that God’s sovereignty is universal. I read to you a moment ago from Psalm 103: “His sovereignty rules over all.” But let’s get more specific, because the Bible gets more specific. Let me give you some overarching categories and just a few illustrations of those categories.

God's providence, first of all, controls the physical world: the earth and everything on it, the universe that's been created. You know, environmentalists we rightly blame for almost worshipping this world. But sadly, even Christians have been influenced by the culture, so that we are guilty of labeling God's care for this world as "nature" or "mother nature." Listen, that's a pagan concept and not a Christian one. Our God rules over this planet. He manages it.

Turn with me to Psalm 104. It was from this Psalm that the hymn writer was inspired to write "O Worship the King." It's a celebration of God's providence over His world. Psalm 104. The Septuagint tells us it was written by David, but we don't know for sure. The structure of Psalm 104 follows the days of creation from Genesis 1. I wish I had time to show you that. I don't. But I just want to point you to the fact that here God's providence over the physical world is celebrated. Look at verse 14. No, go back to verse 13. "[God] waters the mountains from His upper chambers; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of His works." Here God is seen as responsible for the weather. We'll come back to that. But notice then verse 14:

He causes the grass to grow for the cattle,
[He causes] ... vegetation for the labor of man [crops],
So that He may bring forth food from the earth,
And wine which makes man's heart glad,
[And] ... that he may make *his* face glisten with oil,
[The] ... food which sustains man's heart.

Notice here how personally this is described. Earth's crops, its plants, its flowers, are not merely the product of an impersonal law of nature, but the direct result of the care of God. Look at verse 16, "The trees of the Lord drink their fill, the cedars of Lebanon which He planted." I love that. God is described as a great gardener, and the earth as His garden.

He also feeds all the animals. Look at verse 21, "The young lions roar after their prey and seek their food from God." Verse 27, "All [the creatures] wait for You [God] to give them their food in due season." Just like you and I have pets and we care for them and feed them, the Bible describes God as caring for all the creatures on this planet like His pets. Jesus makes the same point in Matthew 6:26. He says your Father feeds the birds.

Turn over to Psalm 147, and I want you to see that theme of weather continued that we saw touched on there in Psalm 104. Psalm 147, and notice verse 7. By the way, this is a Psalm celebrating God's care for Jerusalem and for the people of Israel. But he gets specific about His

control over things like the weather. Notice verse 7:

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;
Sing praises to our God on the lyre,
[He] ... covers the heavens with clouds,
[It's He] ... who provides rain for the earth,
[It's He] ... who makes grass to grow on the mountains.

Look down in verse 15.

He sends forth His command to the earth;
His word runs very swiftly.
He gives snow like wool;
He scatters the frost like ashes.
He casts forth His ice as fragments;
Who can stand before His cold?
He sends forth His word and melts them;
He causes His wind to blow and the waters to flow.

You see how personally God supervises the weather on this planet? The storm that swept across the Metroplex this morning, do you even stop to think that's God? He's at work caring for His planet, caring for His world.

The New Testament, by the way, makes the same point about God's control over the physical world. Jesus, in Matthew 5:45, says, "Your Father ... causes His sun to rise ... and [He] sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." In Matthew 10:29, Jesus says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet [I love this] not one [sparrow] will fall to the ground." And he doesn't say, apart from your Father noticing. That's how we often think of it. What He says is, "Not one [sparrow] will fall to the ground apart from your Father." In other words, not even one little sparrow falls to the ground without the direct supervision of God.

Acts 17:25, Paul says, "[God] Himself gives to all people [He gives to you] life and breath and all things." The reason you're alive right now is because God is sustaining that life in you. He's keeping your heart beating. He's giving you breath. And the moment His will toward you changes, that moment you die. And He gives you all things.

This is our God. “Behold Your God” we sang together. That’s what the writers of Scripture want us to do. You see, God uses secondary causes, but He is the One who gives life and breath and all things. Christian, have you allowed the pagan culture we live in and your own distraction with your busyness to rob you of what God intended every day to cause you to be amazed and to give Him glory? How many times this week did you really notice what God has done? And did you really give Him praise?

God’s providence not only controls the physical world, but it also controls the affairs of nations. Psalm 22:28 says, “He rules over the nations.” The Book of Daniel makes this point on an epic scale. Daniel teaches us that God is sovereign over human history, over every earthly ruler, over every great empire. And it does so in some dramatic ways. Turn to Daniel 4. I love the fact that there is a chapter in our Bible written by one of the greatest kings who ever ruled, a man by the name of Nebuchadnezzar who ruled over Babylon. Notice how he begins Daniel 4:1.

Nebuchadnezzar the king to all the peoples, nations, and men of every language that live in all the earth: “May your peace abound! It has seemed good to me to declare the signs and wonders which the Most High God has done for me.”

It’s a remarkable story. If you haven’t read it recently, you ought to go read it at some point. But let me just take you to the lesson he learned. Go to verse 34. He says,

“At the end of [the] period [of my affliction], I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High [the God above everything else] and [I] praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion ... His kingdom [unlike mine] endures from generation to generation.”

And notice how he describes God’s rule over human history. “All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing [not in value, but compared to His greatness], [and] He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand.” Nobody can tell God, stop it, You can’t do that. Nor can anyone say, “What have you done?” No one can legitimately question what God does. God is Sovereign over human history, even over its greatest kings and its greatest empires. Read Daniel 5, and you’ll find that in the change of world empires, from the great kingdom of Babylon to the kingdom of Medo-Persia, God was there.

In Romans 13:1, Paul reminds us that there're no authorities except those which are established by God. Listen, God raises up nations and empires. He raises up individual rulers. No ruler sits in power apart from God. Sometimes God gives us rulers for blessings. Other times He gives us rulers for judgment. But He always establishes rulers.

Acts 17:26. Listen to this. Paul says, "God ... made ... every nation of mankind." God made "every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation." God decided what nations would exist, when they would exist, where they would exist, how long they would exist. He even drew the boundaries at any point in time. God is Sovereign over every human ruler, over every nation, over every world empire, over every national and international event. Open your paper or go to the internet and look at your news source, and you won't find one story where God isn't in control.

So, Providence includes the physical world. It includes the affairs of nations. It even includes things that seem accidental or insignificant. I love this. You know, we think God is just into the big, the grand, the sweeping. And He is. But God is into the details as well. There're so many examples, but let me give you a couple.

In Esther 6:1 God wanted to save the Jewish nation from destruction, those who were set to kill them, to kill them all, to wipe them out, genocide. How did He do it? Listen to Esther 6:1. "During that night the king could not sleep, so he gave an order to bring the book of records." This is sort of an ancient version of Sominex, I guess. "To bring the book of records, the chronicles, and they were read before the king." Oh, and by the way, the book that the man who was sent to choose, just happened to have the story of a man named Mordecai, a Jewish man who had uncovered a plot to kill the king. He hears the story read while he was still awake, before it puts him to sleep.

He hears the story, and he decides to honor Mordecai. Out of that, God enables the Jewish people to escape the destruction that their enemies were bent upon. Think about it. God gave a king insomnia, and He had him order the books to be brought. And He had just the right book to be brought, and he heard the record of a man named Mordecai. And it saved the entire Jewish nation. Insomnia. God. Proverbs 16:33, says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord."

I love the example in 1 Kings 22. Two kings, the king of the north and the king of the south, Jehoshaphat and Ahab, formed an alliance, and they went to war against the Syrians. (Some

things never change.) And through Micaiah the prophet, God promised that these two kings, the king of the north and the king of the south, would be defeated and that Ahab would die in battle if they, in fact, went to battle.

Well, Ahab was not real keen on that prophecy. And so, he decided to remove the sort of target from his chest and to disguise himself in battle. We'll still go to battle, but I'll disguise myself. I won't make it clear that I'm the king, and that way I'm more likely to survive. So, this is how it unfolded.

In 1 Kings 22:34, we read this, "Now a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel in a joint of the armor." Now think about that. Think about a battlefield scene. Here's a man, probably, who didn't want to be there, maybe a young guy. He was struggling with bravery. He's just "I got to be involved." So, he puts an arrow in his bow. He just pulls it back and lets it fly, not shooting at anything. And God directs that arrow in flight, an arrow shot at random, not merely to King Ahab who has disguised himself, but to a crevice in his armor, and he dies. God directs the flight of an arrow to accomplish His purposes. Folks, there is not a stray molecule in the universe. Every detail is directed by our sovereign God.

Fourthly. God exercises His providence over the lives of individuals. Over your life and my life. Charles Hodge writes,

The circumstances of every man's birth, life, and death are ordered by God. Whether we're born in a pagan or a Christian land; whether weak or strong; with many or few talents; whether we're prosperous or afflicted; whether we live a longer or shorter time are not matters determined by chance, or by the unintelligent sequence of events, but by the will of God.

You know, an amazing example of how God orders the details of our lives is the story of Joseph. God wanted Joseph to be prime minister of Egypt in order to protect His people from the famine that He was going to send in Palestine, and to protect them from the influence of the Canaanites for 400 years. So, God needed this to happen. He had chosen for this to happen. How did He make it happen?

To accomplish God's plan, listen to what He did. He gave dreams to Joseph when he was 17 years old, which Joseph shared with his brothers, which caused his brothers to hate him. They decide to kill him. But at the suggestion of Reuben they decide not kill him but to sell him to

Midianites, who just happened along at the right moment, who happened to be slave traders, who happened to be going to Egypt. When he gets to Egypt, he just happens to be chosen from the line of slaves being sold, by Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's body guard. God prospers him in Potiphar's house where he serves for about ten years.

But at the end of that time, Potiphar's wife makes wicked advances to him and lies about him, so he's imprisoned for about three years. During that time the chief baker and the cupbearer are briefly incarcerated with him. They have dreams; Joseph interprets. One of them is cleared, returns to his position, but forgets Joseph. Two years later, Pharaoh has a dream. The cupbearer remembers Joseph's ability and tells the king. And voila! Joseph is right where God wants him as the prime minister of Egypt—13 years later and all of those weird turns and events. Listen, God's providence is no less complex in your life and my life than it was in the life of Joseph. He is in charge. He is directing.

But specifically, how does God's providence intersect with our individual lives? I don't have time to really develop this. Let me just give them to you. First of all, He oversees our birth and our life circumstances. Psalm 139:16 talks about God weaving us together in our mother's womb. Listen, the person you are, that is, the attributes that make you up, the strengths that you have, all of those things were designed by God. Your physical attributes and appearance, those were all God. He determined that.

Secondly, He determines our outward successes and failures. I love the way Moses puts it about Joseph. In Genesis 39:2, listen to this:

The LORD was with Joseph, so [that] he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. Now his master saw that the LORD was with him and *how* the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand.

Listen, if you're a success, if you've experienced more success in your field than a lot of people around you, that's not because you're such a wonderful person, you're so bright, you're so intelligent. Listen, there are people who are more gifted in your field than you are, and than I am, who've had fewer opportunities. It's God. It's His providence in our successes and our failures.

Thirdly, our free actions, decisions, and choices. Again, there are a number of references we could go to here. But Proverbs 21:1, says that "The king's heart is *like* channels of water in the

hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.” The picture here is of a series of gates on irrigation canals. You want to water your fields? You close this gate, and you throw this gate open, and you direct the water where you want it to go. That’s how God does with the thoughts of the king. It’s how He does with ours as well. Even our sinful acts are under the providence and direction of God.

Now let’s agree that it’s difficult for us to understand how God’s providence intersects with human sin. So, let me briefly remind you of some very basic propositions that you need to remind yourself of lest you go astray.

First of all, God is not the source of evil. He’s holy.

Secondly, God doesn’t tempt us to do evil. James 1 says He doesn’t tempt any man.

Thirdly, God does not force us to do evil. James 1 says we are drawn away by our own lust and enticed. And God doesn’t exempt us from the responsibility of our choices. He will not “leave the guilty unpunished,” Exodus 34:7.

So how does He interact with sinful actions? Very briefly. The Bible says, first of all, God prevents sin sometimes. Genesis 20:6, God says to Abimelech, “I ... kept you from sinning against Me.” He providentially wove the circumstances to keep Abimelech from getting involved with Sarah, Abraham’s wife.

Secondly, God permits sin. He permits people to cherish and manifest their evil disposition. Romans 1, three times God says, I gave them over, I gave them over, I gave them over.

Thirdly, God limits sin; that is, He determines the bounds reached by sinful actions and the extent of their effects. Second Thessalonians 2:7, the Holy Spirit is called the one who restrains, who will someday at the end time be taken out of that place of restraint. Listen, things are not nearly as bad in this world as they could be, because the Holy Spirit limits sin and its effects.

And number four, God directs sin; that is, He directs evil acts to an end unforeseen and unintended by the sinner. The classic illustration of this is Joseph in Genesis 50:20. He says to his brothers, you meant it for evil, “but God meant it for good.” They were acting. They had wills. They were choosing to hurt Joseph. But God also had a will, and that was to accomplish His purpose and to do good to Joseph.

So, sinful acts then, are under His control, only by His permission, and according to His ultimate purpose He limits their impact. When people sin against you, they are completely responsible for their sin, and outside of Christ they will be punished for that sin forever. But understand that God has permitted their sin. In His grace He has limited its evil and its effects in your life. And He will, because He's gracious, even use that sin against you for good. Just as He did with His Own Son. Thomas Watson said, "If men do not act as we would have them, they shall act as God would have them."

There's one last category in which God's providence intersects with our lives, and that is the day and circumstances of our death. Psalm 139:16, says, "... in Your book were all written The days that were ordained *for me*, when as yet there was not one of them." I love the way Paul puts it in Acts 13:36, where he talks of David and he says, "David, after he had served {[God's purpose] in his own generation, fell asleep."

Listen, when you have served God's purpose in your generation, when I have, we will die. Revelation 1:18, Jesus makes it very personal. He says, I have the keys (that is, I have the authority) over death and the grave. Not a single detail of your life is out from under the sovereign providence of God. Our God "works all things after the counsel of His own will." That's Providence.

So, how do we respond to this truth? Very briefly, let me tell you how not to use your knowledge of Providence. Don't use it as an excuse for sin. Paul says, there's "no temptation [taken] you but such as is common to man; ... God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you're able." Don't blame God for your sin.

Secondly, don't use it as an excuse to neglect your responsibilities. The Bible has a lot of commands: work hard, plan, make wise decisions, use God-given resources. Don't use Providence as an excuse just to ignore all those things.

Thirdly, don't use Providence as a guide. In other words, don't try to read God's sovereign plan for your life, like God's going to give you in the tea leaves direction of what He wants you to do. You have to make a wise decision. That's what He's called you to do using His Word.

Number four, don't use Providence as a spiritual diagnostic tool. That's what Job's friends did, and they were wrong. You see, trials do not always signal God's disapproval, and earthly blessings do not always signal His approval.

So how do you use the knowledge of Providence? Very quickly, very briefly.

Number one, submit to God's providence. Submit to God's will in your life. Don't fight God. First Peter 5:6. Peter, talking to those who were Christians, who were being persecuted, who were suffering lots of trials, says to them, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God." He meant accept God's providence in your life.

Number two, don't assume your plans and your desires are part of God's sovereign plan. In James 4, James reminds us that there are people who say, you know, I'm going to do this, and I'm going to do this, and next year I'll do this. And he says that's sinful; you're not including God. He says you need to acknowledge in all of your planning—plan, yes—but in all of your planning acknowledge "if [God] wills."

Number three, trust God. Trust His providence. Let me ask you, does God lie? Does God lie? No! Then when He says He's going to cause "all things to work together for good to those who love [Him] ... who are called according to His purpose," He's not going to go back on that promise. Whatever you're going through, He will keep His Word. Trust God.

Number four, don't fear the future. I love Psalm 91, the first 6 verses. Listen, if God is your hiding place, if He's your refuge, "A thousand may fall at your [left hand] ... ten thousand [may fall] at your right hand," but you're going to be there until God is done with you. You don't need to fear the future. Nothing can happen or will happen outside of His control.

Number five, be deeply grateful. Be deeply grateful. First Thessalonians 5:18, "In everything." In all of the circumstances of your life, thank God. Why? Because they're all good in and of themselves? No. But because God has wisely woven them together, and He will use them for good in your life.

Beloved, hold fast to the truth that our God is sovereign over all things. Let's pray together. Father, thank You for these amazingly comforting truths.

Lord, I pray for those here today who are in Christ. Lord, drive these truths deep within our souls. Help them to be the anchor for our lives in the times of trouble and difficulty. Lord, remind us of who You are. And may we find our hope, our confidence, our joy, in You, that You're sovereign, and that You work that sovereignty out in the details of our lives through Your providence, not a stray molecule in Your universe. Lord, we praise you. Help us to apply these

truths, to live in light of them.

Father, I pray for those here this morning who don't know You. May they see You, having glimpsed You in some of Your greatness. May they humble themselves before You. And may they come to You in the way, in Your providence You have designed, in keeping with Your eternal plan, that they would find forgiveness in and through the death of Your Son, Jesus Christ. May this be the day when they come in repentance and faith to Him and call upon You.

We pray in Jesus' name, amen.