

What is Providence?

Does God control events indirectly through people and circumstances? This article explains providence, the doctrine of means, and how God remains sovereign even in the presence of evil.

Providence and means

Nearly everything God does, he does indirectly. God is certainly a God of miracles. Yet even in miracles he usually works through something. When God parted the Red Sea, he used a strong east wind blowing throughout the night. When he saves souls, he uses preaching. When he communicates truth, he does it through his Word. Most miracles employed something or someone as a means, except for the resurrection of Christ or some of the miracles of Jesus.

Whether through miracles or other means, it is the same sovereign God who governs his creation. Divine government is called “*providence*.”

Providence includes the concept of God working indirectly. He hides himself behind people and things, working through them to accomplish his purposes. He uses methods to achieve his goals. His indirect way of working is called the “*doctrine of means*.” This principle is central to the whole concept of providence.

The term “means” is like the word “*tool*.” A tool is an instrument we use to accomplish a task. If we eat spaghetti, we use a fork. The fork is a tool. It is the means for eating spaghetti.

It is possible to eat spaghetti without a fork. We can eat it directly or with some other utensil. We would sound silly to say we were dependent on forks, without which we could never eat spaghetti. We should assume forks have value, even though we can do without them.

So it is with God. He has a toolbox of means at his disposal to accomplish his will. As sovereign God, he is free to use these tools or not.

The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it like this:

In his ordinary providence, God makes use of means, yet he is free to work without, above, and against them as he pleases. WCF Chapter 5, Art. 3

This passage expresses the idea of God normally working through things and people. Yet he can ignore these and do miracles directly if he wants or even supersede natural law if he pleases.

Martin Luther was thinking of these ideas when he said God is the hidden God who reveals Himself.

The doctrine of means is an essential balance to the concept of the sovereignty of God. We can state it this way: Yes, God is sovereign...indirectly. Without this important doctrine, we would fall into fatalism, like the absurd idea, "Whatever will be will be." Laziness can result if we fail to apply the means God provides to do his work. He uses these means to accomplish his sovereign will, though he is never dependent on them.

Providence and the problem of evil

The Bible shows by numerous examples how God permits evil to produce a greater good. We do not always see that greater good. Yet we have enough scriptural examples to accept this principle when we are unable to see the outcome. These examples are the biblical response to the question of the sovereignty of God and evil.

The best example of God's sovereignty over evil is in the crucifixion of Jesus. Our redemption resulted from this profound injustice. Yet those who crucified him are guilty before God of unspeakable evil and will be punished for it. This is true even though God ordained the time, circumstances, and people involved.

"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."

Acts 2:23

In this sense, evil itself becomes one of many tools God uses to accomplish his purpose. The existence of evil, therefore, is no proof against his sovereignty, providence, or goodness. Instead, God's ability to bring good out of evil proves his [sovereignty](#).

Divine permission and sovereignty

Some people explain the existence of evil using the idea of divine permission. This argument is fine up to a point, as long as we avoid the impression of a God who is passive in some areas. God is passive in nothing whatsoever. He never sits back and lets things just happen.

God permitted Jesus to be crucified. Yet everything about the event, including the people involved and all the circumstances, was controlled and limited by God. Divine permission never means God withdraws his influence and allows them to happen. Though *permission* is a correct concept, it must never be divorced from his providential government of all things.

He allows people to do evil while limiting and governing the circumstances surrounding the evil they do. In this way, the evil itself does not proceed from God, yet he remains sovereign over its parameters.

Skeptic arguments against providence

A common objection to Christianity by skeptics is based on the existence of evil. The reasoning is, “If God is good and also sovereign, how could he permit evil? Therefore God does not exist.”

This argument assumes “good” has an existence apart from God. Yet the entire concept of good is based on the assumption of the existence of a good God. The skeptic here is using circular reasoning, proposing a concept (good) that is derived from God to refute the existence of God. The question itself is self-contradictory and makes no sense.

From this essay we learn

- *Providence* refers to God’s government over everything in his creation.
- The *doctrine of means* refers to God acting indirectly, using things and people to accomplish his purpose.
- Evil is one of the *means* he uses to accomplish his purposes. Yet he is not the cause of evil.
- Though God permits evil, this does not mean he is completely passive in its development. He governs the circumstances and conditions in which people do evil, limiting them in various ways.
- Thus, the [existence of evil](#) does not contradict the providence of God, nor is God the author of evil.
- Attacks on the providence of God because of the existence of evil are self-contradictory and without substance.

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