

Questions on Divine Providence

James S. Spiegel, in his book, The Benefits of Providence (Crossway Books, 2005, pp. 13-14), writes this regarding the doctrine of divine providence:

“. . . The doctrine of providence is a fundamental theological issue. The extent to which God controls the world is of vital importance both to our personal lives and to numerous related Christian doctrines. For example, one’s doctrine of providence directly affects one’s view of human freedom. This, in turn, influences the way one conceives of human responsibility. One’s views on these issues also shape one’s approach to God’s relationship to human sin and suffering. And the doctrine of providence affects one’s take on various moral attributes of God, including his wisdom, kindness, justice, mercy, and love. These are not trivial theological matters but momentous issues that affect believers at a basic level.”

Using Dr. Spiegel’s quotation as a jumping-off point, how would you answer the following questions? With a few of them, I have suggested some initial answers. You fill in the rest!

1. How does the doctrine of divine providence affect one’s view of human freedom? Human responsibility? What about Providence and prayer?

One of the answers to question #1 is that God willed the death of His Son, yet He disapproved of the sin/sinners which/whom carried it out (cf. Acts 2:23). Carl Henry wrote (cited in John Piper, The Pleasures of God, revised & expanded edition, Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 2000, appendix: “Are there Two Wills in God?: Divine Election and God’s Desire for All to be Saved,” p. 319): “The living God has the creative power necessary to bring about a morally reprehensible state of affairs, for he determined and prophesied that Judas would betray Christ. But the foreordination of an evil act is not itself evil, since God need not will what He wills for the reasons others may will them.”

Therefore, there are two “wills” in God: God’s sovereign will/God’s moral will; God’s efficient will/God’s permissive will; God’s secret will/God’s revealed will; God’s will of decree/God’s will of command; God’s decretive will/God’s preceptive will. God’s will of decree cannot be thwarted; God’s will of command may or may not be obeyed.

God does not delight in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18); but in another sense, He does (Deuteronomy 28:63; 2 Samuel 2:25). Also, look at Lamentations 3:37-38 in order to understand God’s role in evil circumstances. In the New Testament, look at 1 Timothy 2:4 and Romans 9:6-23 for additional passages on these matters.

With regard to Providence and prayer, James 5:16 and 1 John 5:14-15 speak to these issues. In addition, the very act of prayer is properly humble and submissive. The point is not to conform God’s will to mine, but to conform my will to His!

2. What is the relationship between Providence and human sin and suffering?

Paul Helm, writing in his book, The Providence of God (Downer’s Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1994, p. 231), says: “The evil that is being experienced is the result of the sovereign will of God. While the reality of the secondary causes, the immediate causes of the evil, is recognized, the evil comes from God, not as evil, the vindictive affliction of a malicious tormentor, but from one all of whose ways are just and good. Not only can Christians believe, in general, that the evil is not purposeless or the result of divine purposelessness or inactivity, but they also have some inkling as to the purpose of that evil.”

3. How would you relate God’s Providence and the character of God (i.e., His wisdom, kindness, justice, mercy, and love)?
4. How would you relate the Providence of God and the fruit of the Spirit in the life of the Christian?