

Ten Things Providence Is and Is Not

Whether it is the current pandemic or a tsunami or something far more local like a car accident or a fatality from cancer, it seems these are the occasions in which a certain set of usual suspects emerge, whether online or to a downcast auditorium (more the former it seems these days), to tell the world as if comfortingly, "Don't worry, God has caused this for his glory." I will commit no *ad hominem* here: the people that say these things are, as I have known them, and as I was one of them at one point, are sincere, honest, and good people. But it is, as I knew my former self, entirely possible that we all contain in our heads and hearts a kind of cocktail of convictions, some more bitter and others more sweet, and thankfully, for many, the sweeter side is what more often prevails practically if only to mask it until an after taste lingers. Still, this leaves others wanting something a bit more distilled. What does "cause" mean in that statement, and what does "glory" mean? Can it mean something better and more clear when it comes to these difficult questions of providence? Here I offer ten clarifications.

1. *Providence is not always readily discernible.* I have listened to a creationist apologist argue that bananas show providential design because they are so easy to peel. Helmut Thielicke once said, "History has in it too much sense for us to be able to regard it as a gigantic playground of forces of blind chance. History has in it too much nonsense for us to be able to deduce from it a purposeful providence that guides it."¹ We need to respect both valences. In the book of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher reflects on life's vanities. He says, "I saw all the work of God. No one can find out what is happening under the sun" (Ecc. 8:17). He goes on to say, "Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all" (9:11). We sometimes like to think that the Teacher in Ecclesiastes is postulating hypothetical atheism in order to deconstruct himself, or that he is trying to think of things as if he did not know about revelation or God (surely he does and says so), so that is not reading him resolutely. He mentioned providence in the previous passage, which he assuredly does believe in, and moves into saying that "chance happens to us all." Some dismiss what he says as "phenomenal" as he speaks, reflecting "under the sun." But if we dismiss him because of that, we all must ask of ourselves, what makes our perspective any less phenomenal, any less "under the sun"? Just because we know God and know revelation does not stop our knowledge from being any less human. There is nothing about our faith in God that stops us from perceiving anything, including God, from "under the sun." There is no foundationalist grappling hook by which we can capture the absolute as to grasp it infallibly or any formula by which we can surmount the possibilities of failure. Our knowledge is ever finite, ever fallen, and ever mortal under the sun, and it would be a strange thing if our faith in our Creator somehow was used to bypass those facts to seize upon transcendence. We may want certainty and to make sense of things so fast that we sometimes content in trading in God for an idol, for surely to claim to have seized transcendence in some finite thing, whether in a rock or in our ideas, is just that. I have seen pastors comfort parents

¹ Helmut Thielicke, *Man in God's World* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1948), 136.

who have lost a child that "this was all a part of God's plan" or that a tragic death happens so that they could preach the gospel at their funeral. To these, I must say that we should not be so quick to claim to know God's ways as to ascribe silly or downright tragic things to him.

2. *Providence is not about finding some hidden spiritual cause underneath and apart from the material.* We are not dualists, nor should we commit some *Deus ex Machina* to explain or fix every tragedy, ignoring the data from scientists and doctors. Did COVID-19 miraculously and inexplicably show up in North America? Or did COVID-19 come about - internet conspiracies notwithstanding (and make no mistake, we shouldn't stand them at all) - from Chinese wet markets where the improper treatment of animals and their improper storage has bred this super-virus moving from animal to animal to human, and this started inflecting the area of Wuhan? Is this virus because of nature or our mishandling of nature or both? Did it not spread further and is still spreading because people did and do not take it seriously: how it spreads, how we need to, as the Premier of Nova Scotia eloquently put it, "Stay the blazes home!" how medical professionals need more PPE, etc.? Is this not being made worse by politicians prioritizing the economy over the dignity of the vulnerable?

Mother Teresa once said, "God does not create poverty, we do, because we do no share." Something similar happens regarding the current pandemic when we jump to saying, "God caused it." The world is not some shell running parallel to the true currents of spiritual reality. This short circuits the process of looking at our world, ourselves, our practices and responsibilities. In a world that has refused to take care of nature and animals, has refused to build universal health care and good governance, refused to listen to good medical advice and social distancing, we do not need to invoke the divine's hand to realize humanity reaps what it sows. God is not punishing us, but perhaps our foolishness is hurting others and ourselves.

3. *Providence is more about God's provision, not causation.* God creates and sustains. The world came about by divine fiat. The Spirit of God hovered upon the face of the deep; God spoke, and the world was. Moreover, God took this world, formed by his word, and breathed his Spirit into it, and life began. God's word and breath are the sources of existence in general and life specifically. In him is the being of all being, and that is why creation not only exists, but is also orderly, beautiful, and good.

At any moment, we can have cause to be grateful. This is not meant to guilt-trip the downtrodden, for there is room for lament. I have found that true lament leads into thankfulness (which is the rhyme of the Psalter). For many of us, this pandemic has not been that bad. One person said when asked if they thought it was the end times, merely responded, "If this is the end times, it has been the end times in undeveloped countries for many decades." In other words, when I think about staying home or even difficult prospects of money or how cooped up and isolated we all feel, I still come back to the fact that all things considered I still have so much to be thankful for and my woes, if I dare call it that, should never stop me from realizing I am responsible for helping the lives of others get better. Even when life seems chaotic or random (or as the Teacher might say "chancy")- and if quantum physics is correct, there is a particular fundamental interminability to the states of things - this does not stop us from beholding our lives and seeing goodness.

Now, if left there, this would paint a picture of the world with a hole in the canvas. This world is not Leibniz's best of all possible worlds. For if it was, there would be no need to be saved from anything in it. We know there is a lot that does not look so orderly or good. Creation is corrupted, bent, and crooked. While I will get to the problem of evil in a second, it is important to note that creation is made good, but not complete. It is a goodness of innocence, not maturity. That means providence, like creation, is not an event in the past or even just ongoing in the present, but is always future looking, awaiting something more.

4. *Providence does not mean God is causing everything or is glorified in everything.* If we say that "God is in control and causes all things for his glory," I can't figure out which one that misunderstands more: cause, control, or glory. Glory is the presence of God displayed in his goodness as the magnitude of his beauty, the way the stars makes one feel moved with awe (Ps. 19:1). But the magnitude of the stars is not the same as the magnitude of a pandemic, though both deserve a moment of pause. Is God glorified in evil or tragedy just as much as good? It is possible that we can glorify God in times of adversity, yes, and admittedly sometimes we just don't know what is best for us until in hindsight. But that is not the same thing. If evil, not just adversity, "glorifies" God, that is like saying God is present in and through evil, and his holiness does not permit us to say that. God's goodness is his glory and vice versa.

Otherwise, God is not unlike the analogy that the atheist Slavov Zizek once described Calvinism: God is the arsonists that lit his house on fire to rush in and save a few of his kids in order to look like a hero to himself. Such heroism is not, but biblical standards, glorious. I don't think that is what we mean by God being in control, either. In fact, while it was never stated in an ecumenical council (perhaps because to the early church it was so obvious), the Synods of Arles (c. 473 A.D.) and Orange (529 A.D.) both condemned this kind of amoral determinism: "We not only do not believe that any are foreordained to evil by the power of God but even state with utter abhorrence that if there are those who want to believe so evil a thing, they are anathema." For many, these decisions are not binding, but we would be foolish to refuse it as good advice.

When we say that "God is good all the time," that does not mean that there are times when we do not sense this goodness or that there are events that God is deeply displeased with. God is not a pantheist: all that is is not God, nor all that happens displays the presence of his glory. We must understand that we do feel God's absence in this world, and that actually is a very theistic thing to realize. This is very similar to the longing of some Psalms: "How long O Lord? Where are you, God? Why have you forgotten us?" It would seem that if God is glorified in everything equally, the Psalmist has just committed blasphemy in feeling an absence of God in the world, longing for God's kingdom, something more than just the same. When we pray, "Your will be done," this is not to consign ourselves to fateful stoicism. It is prayed, knowing that we see a world that is not "on earth as it is in heaven."

Omnipotence does not mean omni-causality, for it is, as John Polkinghorne in his little book on providence, warns, "The God that does everything is also the God that does nothing."² When we talk about God's glory and his control, it is best to insist that these are eschatological terms. He is in control in that there is nothing in existence that surprises him or defeats his purposes. God is in control not in the sense that every event, whether a pandemic or a US election or the result of

² John Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence* (London: SPCK, 1989), 17.

a football game, is somehow by the fact that they exist, therefore God's will. God is in control because no matter how much we go against this will, God's creativity and goodness can work redemption in it.³ Thus God's glory is fully shown in the final day when evil is overthrown, every tear is dried, and death is no more. God is good all the time, not because all times are equally good, but because there is no time that prevents the goodness he has promised.

5. *Providence does not mean we lack free will.* Creation is made, while finite, nevertheless free. Many see freedom and God's sovereignty as a kind of zero-sum game, inserting an "either-or." The divine-human relationship is not a pie eating contest. However, Aquinas articulated (with the brilliance that it does not take a Roman Catholic to call it "magisterial") that God acts with secondary causes. The unfortunate thing is that this notion has been crudely re-deployed. Secondary causes increasingly came to be thought of as God still directly acting only as through a proxy so that the proxy takes the blame. This leaves the concept sounding like how the mind controls a hand to move, but then when the hand commits a crime, the hand is punished, not the mind. A blunder like that deserves no mere smack on the wrist.

No, this characterization misses what medieval theologians called the doctrine of concurrence. Saint Paul states to the Athenians: God is "in whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God wills that we have free will (to paraphrase Maimonides). God is not only the condition of our being; he is the condition of our freedom. His presence empowers our persistence. This is not the same as modern autonomy, where my freedom is only possible in strict independence and objectivity from conditions.

Jesus prays, as both divine and human, "not my will but yours be done" (Mt. 26:39). For Jesus to pray this, it implies that he has will, and in the present circumstance, understandably, he is vexed over the path he knows he must go, yet freely submits himself to the will of the Father. While there is so much in this passage we could unpack, it suggests that true free will is not at odds with Trinitarian relationship. In fact, it might be the very thing that makes it possible. And there is a paradox here: we have the freedom to choose God, in freedom we ought to freely submit to God, and in this relationship, submitting our will to his, we realize true freedom.

6. *Providence also does not mean our autonomy is total, thankfully.* Just because we have free will, invited into responsibility and offered choices, does not mean we are autonomous. This is the modern myth of individualism. Take away God's goodness, take away all the limits of our existence, whether our bodies, our relationships, or our obligations, seeking to find some individual unmoved mover, some unaffected bedrock on which to build a self that is truly "me," and you will be reduced to nothing. It does not exist. Limitation, contingency, and relationship are the very conditions of identity and freedom.

Here is where the mysterious and paradoxical interplay begins to become more apparent as God acts upon us, and is also the condition of our capacity to respond to that action, whether obeying or disobeying. In this, in the messiness of relationship, in its ebb and flow and give and take, I cannot seem to get away from the notion that God does act beyond our choosing. God acts within and through the process of things, but he is also free to interrupt them. The Apostle Paul did not choose to be temporarily blinded, nor did Lazarus consent to be risen from the grave (although

³ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 16.

both did appreciate it after). Nor can I simply dismiss that God offers choices, that this is fundamental and teleological to a true relationship, and so he draws us into responsibility, even listens and responds dynamically: Abraham barter with him, Jacob wrestles, Nineveh repents and God "changes his mind" (Jonah 4:2). One need not resort to open theism to realize that an ineffable and immutable God takes relationship this seriously. I can only say that relationship with God involves a reciprocity that defies systematization.

But one thing should be kept in mind. If we are free, God is surely freer. As I said, God is not in control because he is causing everything directly, but rather that there is nothing that will prevent his purposes from coming to fruition. Whether we become Christians by a gentle invitation that we ponder and decide to pursue or by a dramatic event of conversion in which we found our hearts inexplicably warmed, our salvation is because God's Yes has broken through our No. And that is why we trust that while we see a pandemic killing thousands, we trust in a day where "God will swallow up death forever" (Isa. 25:8 cf. Rev. 21:4).

7. Providence is truly understood when we look at Jesus. Jesus is the "visible image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:18). This is important to hold because there are many events in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament (although many take the images of Revelation much too literally as well), that might seem like God is not all that good at all at first inspection, commanding genocide or sending plagues or whatever. But we have to keep in mind that there is a narrative unfolding in the Bible from Old to New. The relationship between Old and New is not one of "bad god" versus "good god" like some 80's police show. It is between less clear and more clear, less intense and more. It is so much so, however, that the Old Testament is considered the "shadow" of the new (Heb. 10:1), and even the Apostle John declares, knowing full well about Moses and Isaiah, that compared to seeing Jesus in the flesh, it is like "no one has ever seen God" (John 1:18). That should give a bit of explanation why some see quite a difference between Old and New.

Between God displayed as light and dark and God who "in him is light, and there is no darkness" (1 John 1:5), between first Adam and second Adam, first Joshua and true Joshua, who suffers for his enemies, first David and the Son of Man, whose throne is the cross, first Moses and the true teacher, whose law is love, there is a stunning advancement, and the early church thinkers do not see that as Marcionism. It is the difference the incarnation makes. Jesus fulfills by filling fuller. And if we know God is revealed in Jesus, that Jesus is sinless, fully obedient to the law as he is its logos, therefore if God is sinless, as he always has been, in his infinite nature we cannot ascribe to God something that is immoral to us in our finitude: "be holy as I am holy" (Lev. 20:7), and God never says do as I say not as a do.

It is important to say that while we must maintain that God's ways are not our ways, that does not write God a blank cheque. God answering out of the whirlwind at the end of the Book of Job, acknowledging God's transcendence and mystery, is not the same thing as causality. If it were Zeus or Baal could be equally justified for all their prophets would need to invoke is mystery and sovereignty. The Anabaptist Pilgram Marpeck warned about this kind of theological cop-out:

God is a God of order and not of disorder, and he has firmly united his own omnipotence to his will and order. It is not as the predestinarians and others say, without any

discrimination, that God has the right to all salvation and damnation. He has, certainly, but not outside his of his order and will, to which his power is subordinated. Otherwise, one may claim his power on behalf of all as indeed, Satan and his prophets are doing. Wherever the omnipotence and might of God serve their purposes, they imperiously and indiscriminately use it... Whenever they find themselves at their wit's end, they save their theology by appealing to the omnipotence of God. There is no sharper nor more deceitful article of faith teaching than to use and preach the power and omnipotence of God outside the order of God's Word.⁴

God's power is always one with his goodness, and that goodness is shown in Jesus. It is just that if his goodness is infinite, we need to keep in mind that we will have a hard time understanding it. Just because we do not know God's ways and that his ways are higher, cannot then permit us to ascribe to God something that goes against what he has revealed in Jesus. Does Jesus allow adversity? I agree with that. God knows some trials do produce character and some suffering we know as Christians we are called to in order to further God's kingdom to others. But, could we see Jesus, however, inflecting some of the general populace with COVID-19? Or murdering or lying? All the Bible speaks of the same God, but I would be wary to say that we have a more clear depiction of God elsewhere than Jesus showing his kingdom, his rule, his way in healing, forgiveness, justice, and love. Jesus reveals what God's rule is really like, and it is a shunning fact of the Gospels that Jesus only heals illnesses. He never inflicts them. If asked, as I have been asked, "Did God kill my loved one?" we do not need to hesitate to say, "No." How do I know this? Jesus.

8. *Providence is not always about power.* Just as omnipotence does not mean omni-causality, neither does God's providence always look like power. We have to remember that Saint Paul considers "Christ crucified" to be "the power and wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23, 24). We often think that power is displayed in brute strength, such that our prayers often take on the tone that God should, on a regular basis, be invading this world and shaking it up. If God were to solve all our problems with these kinds of interventions, our deeper problems would not get solved. It would be like hitting the reset button over and over on your computer only to end up at the same blue screen. But if it is the cross that reveals God, the king and his kingdom most clear, we see that God's most authentic and clear way of acting in this world is not with strength, although he can do so. God is saying that suffering love is the most powerful force, that the cross is what defeats sin, ultimately. While Jesus does miracles of healing, nothing heals as deeply and truly as the cross. Sadly we want the first kind of healing more than the later most times. God's true power is his perfect gentleness. It is worth quoting Emil Brunner at length here:

There is a Divine Omnipotence which is exercised in compulsion - His work in the realm of Nature, and in that which man experiences absolutely as Destiny. But there is also a Divine Omnipotence where man decides in freedom, and this is His "Omnipotence" proper, that which most clearly expresses His sublime divine Nature: His Nature as the Holy Lord, and as the Loving Father. God so wills to be "almighty" over us, that He wins hearts through His condescension in His Son, in the Cross of the Son. No other Almighty Power of God could thus conquer and win our hearts. The heart is the one sphere that

⁴ Pilgram Marpeck, "Judgment and Decision," in *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Walden: Plough Publishing, 2019), 341.

cannot be forced. No love can be forced - God the Creator makes us so free that even His coercion could not force us to love Him. But He has indeed created us so free because He wills to reveal Himself to us as love because our free love is the highest that He desires. If we could describe the Omnipotence of God, we would have to do it in the way in which Rembrandt depicts the Passion. Everything which might otherwise be described as "Omnipotent" would have to be left wholly or half dark, and all the light would be concentrated on this One point: The love of the Crucified - which as the only power that can do so - subdues our pride, conquers our fears, and thus wins our hearts. The turning of the rebellious despairing heart of man to God as the result of His turning to man, man being dethroned from his position of likeness to God by the stooping down of God from His Throne - that is the supreme proof of the divine Omnipotence because it is His most difficult work. At its highest, the Omnipotence of God is one with His Holiness and His Love.⁵

9. *Providence does not mean evil has a purpose.* God does not need evil, nor does God keep evil around because he finds it useful. To see God as causing everything, including evil, or to say that evil has a purpose, means evil belongs to the order of creation, for if things that have purpose are a part of their goodness (in the classic sense of Thomas' transcendentals: truth, beauty, goodness, purpose are all one), we really can't say evil has a purpose. It is an absurdity in creation that ought not to be. Remember that Satan causes harm to Job, as God says, "for no reason" (Job 2:3). Evil has explanations (Augustine's *Felix Culpa* and Plantinga's free will defence have their place), but not answers, for answers in the sense that tries to surmount our place under the sun, often make evil good. If Jesus is God's logos of creation, we must be careful never to say evil has logos.

God does not work goodness through or with evil, as if good and evil are his right and left hand, but God does work goodness despite evil. God can turn the tragedies of this world into moments of peace, goodness, and joy. We see that in the story of Joseph, where at the end he tells his brothers who sold him into slavery that God guided events so that he could save his family, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20). This is not saying God caused the wrong done to Joseph - the blame is squarely on the brothers - but rather, God worked within this and despite this an unforeseen good. Similarly in John 9, the disciples wonder why a man was born blind, but Jesus does not really answer the question: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (9:3). Evil has no purpose, but it is always God's purpose to do good.

10. *Providence is just as much about our compassion as it is about God's.* Gabriel Marcel once said that the problem of evil is not so much a problem to be solved so much as a mystery to be lived. The ending of Ecclesiastes must be our ending, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Ecc. 12:13-14).

Why is there evil in this world? I think we cannot justify it with an ultimate answer. We know

⁵ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 254

that God allows free will for relationship; God is patient with us; that God promises to end all evil one day; and in Jesus Christ's cross and resurrection, we know his promises are sure. Until then, the answer to the problem of evil is not a matter of comprehending the depths of God but a matter of responding in a way that is godly. If we know that God's power is not like conventional power, that love is the solution to the evils in this world, all our prayers of petition to God become God's invitation back to us. Augustine insisted, "God without us, will not, just as us without God, cannot." Providence is practice.

Where is God during COVID-19? Rabbi Harold Kushner once said, "Our responding to life's unfairness with sympathy...maybe the surest proof of all of God's reality."⁶ Where is God in all this? Where is God acting? The answer is a question: Where do we see people acting Christ-like? And so, he is with those suffering. The presence of Christ on a god-forsaken cross displays this. He is also in the compassion of those good nurses and doctors trying their best to heal people. He is in the wisdom of good world leaders. He is the decency we sense when we do our part to flatten the curve. He is in the window paintings of children who create little moments of joy in the midst of all this anxiety. Look at the church, his body, not the greedy, delusional gun-nut preachers and televangelists, but the good pastors and others of our communities, many of them fearing the loss of their job as money is low, yet still work to bring food to the shut-in or email out words of encouragement. In this, God invites us to be "co-labourers with God" (1 Cor. 3:9). The hands of God are not the calamities of history, but the pierced hands on the cross manifested in every deed of solidarity, sacrifice, and service by those that know and live his Gospel.

There are those that argue over the existence of God, and then there are those who live in such a way as to make his existence manifest. So, with all these questions and clarifications, in these answers and refusals of answers, may we now go and be God's providence in a broken world.

Dr. Spencer Miles Boersma
Assistant Professor of Theology, Acadia Divinity College
Monday, May 4th, 2020

⁶ Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Anchor, 1981), 156.