

# Living under God's Providence

Jean LEE (MDiv1)

## I. Introduction

What is god if God created men and leave them to their woes? Fortunately, God is a God who provides, preserves and governs in accordance with His own divine nature. In his definition of providence, Karl Barth asserted that providence means “the superior dealings of the Creator with His creation, the wisdom, omnipotence and goodness with which He maintains and governs in time this distinct reality according to the counsel of His own will.”<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, Deism is a sad proposition which contradicts the records of God's act throughout history. If God stops short of creation and neither act nor need to act today, God becomes an impersonal God who cannot possess the love and passion ascribed to Him. Yet another view, pantheism, attributes the universe to God in such a way that God's superior nature and glory are reduced. By describing creation as God's own emanation, we limit God by ignoring His distinctiveness and self-sufficiency.

Paul Helm pointed towards the clear scriptural teachings of God upholding the universe under the biblical doctrine of providence.<sup>2</sup> In Acts 17:28, Paul told us that in God we live and move and have our being. This was further emphasized when Paul said that “... in him (Jesus Christ) all things hold together.” (Col. 1:17) Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus Christ is “the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his

---

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley & T.F. Torrance, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-74), III/3:3.

<sup>2</sup> P. Helm, *The Providence of God* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 82.

powerful word.” God continues to act by upholding and sustaining the universe at least in a global sense.

Reformed theologians state that under providence, God preserves, guides, and co-operate with all beings in their long range purposes.<sup>3</sup> However, there are numerous variations in the way that theologians see providence in the context of God's nature, predestination, human freedom, and the problem of evil. Our understanding of providence comes down to its effects on our faith and daily living, such as how we pray and discern God's will. This document attempts to understand the concept of providence, and briefly examines the related applications to Christian living under such theological framework.

## II. On Providence

### 1. Providence Started from the Fall

As we embark on the exploration of God's providence, we should identify the starting point and place providence under the appropriate context to be studied. Some literature on providence examines the subject under the context of creation, leading to confusion between God's goodness and the creation of evil.<sup>4</sup> To derive the appropriate prospective, we must explore providence through biblical truth and revelation, rather than metaphysics. If we rely on the philosophers' metaphysical means, we run the risk of leading

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 270.

<sup>4</sup> One example is the Reformed theologian Huldrych Zwingli, whose views were in agreement with those of John Calvin except in the area of evil. Zwingli stated that all causes, including secondary ones, are instruments by which God accomplishes His will. God gives man a law that He would transgress against to show His righteousness. As such, Zwingli believed that God is the author of evil. In his view, all that God decrees are wise and holy and just. Therefore, for God to be the author of evil is holy and wise and just. (Chris Perkinson, *A Synopsis of Calvin's Doctrine of the Providence of God*; available from <http://www.christonmy.com/Articles/Theology/CalvinOnProvidence.pdf>).

ourselves astray in our own imagination. True understanding of a being higher than ourselves shall only be possible through the means by which the being reveals itself to us. In Genesis 2:2 God rests upon the end of creation, yet He continues to work and does not slumber (Jn. 5:17), (Ps. 121:4).<sup>5</sup>

God's creation and providence are to be explored separately in order to properly differentiate the original creation of complete goodness, and the situation that human fell into after the fall.<sup>6</sup> As Barth stated, "providence is God's knowledge, will and action in His relation to the creature already made by Him and not to be made again."<sup>7</sup> God's providence governs and cares for creation after the fall. This marks the start of the human journey under God's providence.

We must note that God created man capable of turning away from God, thereby allowing free will and true love based on man's own choice. This choice does not necessitate the turning away from God, for Adam could have selected to live under His will without sinning. This capability was demonstrated in Jesus (the second Adam), described as "... one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin." (Hb. 4:15). However, Adam was tempted and under his own free will turned towards sin. As such, "... sin entered the world through one man." (Rom. 5:12).

Man is therefore culpable of the fall, of which the actual occurrence was permitted as an option of free will in order to necessitate self-initiated, truthful love. Sin entered the world and brought about a whole range of consequences, including evil and its forces over the world.

In order to fully understand providence, we must take note that had it not been God's providence commencing upon

---

<sup>5</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, 88.

<sup>6</sup> 楊牧谷主編，《當代神學辭典 CD 版》(香港: 校園, 1997), 見「Providence」條。

<sup>7</sup> Barth, *CD*, III/3: 6.

the Fall, humankind and all of nature would have fallen entirely under worldly evil forces that favor destruction. The bible tells us that evil did not originate from God or His temptation on man, but his own desire. We are unable to remove ourselves from the responsibility of sins in our attempts to rationalize or argue that God permitted and thereby ordained evil, because clearly, "... each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed." (Jas.1:14). The fact that we continue to possess some form of goodness deep in our hearts, and that nature continues its natural regeneration under twisted reflections, all point towards the providence care of the creator.

The disciple James wrote, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from Father of the heavenly lights..." (Jas.17). If we can imagine for a moment the situation that would have happened if God removes Himself entirely from His creation upon the Fall, we may start to understand what providence means. The Fall marks the start of providence when God showed His providential care within the consequential boundaries of the curse upon nature. For humankind, He ensured that we do not live under sinfulness forever by driving Adam out of the Garden of Eden. At the personal level, "...God made garments of skin for Adam and His wife and clothed them." (Gen.3:21). God's providence showed in His loving acts for His children as their heavenly Father.

## 2. The Foundation of Providence

Theologians talk about the risk versus no-risk model of providence. When we say that God provides, it appears that the mere definition of providence itself already assumes God's own nature of omnipotence, perfection, goodness and sovereignty in their totality. If we deviate from what God reveals to be His perfect nature, then we would be forced to examine providence also in a partial or imperfect context. In

that case, God who cares becomes a god who cares but may also care not, or is unable to care.<sup>8</sup> Therefore when we honor God as God Himself, we are required to put ourselves into a situation where God ultimately exhibits His omnipotence and sovereignty.

The intriguing part of God's providence lies in the co-existence of an omnipotence being, the almighty God, as well as earthly creatures that selected for themselves a destiny of destruction upon the fall. Yet God in His full wisdom allowed the free choice. God takes no-risk in the sense that His omnipotence and wisdom allows Him to act freely in any minute to accomplish His will. If He so wishes, He can wipe out all evils or the entire universe and reconstructs it within any split second. Needless to say, God can always intervene in such a way as to accomplish His will. Yet God accommodates His creation and continues to provide and care for it in His all loving ways within the original covenantal rules of His own creation. The greatness of His providence proceeded to its climax in God's willingness to suffer through His incarnation to redeem and rebuild a people of His own.

Another view worth mentioning is the concept of antinomy. It simply says that after a careful and thorough analysis of providence, the relationship between divine action and human actions is incomprehensible.<sup>9</sup> It is of necessity

---

<sup>8</sup> Hoonhout in his article "Grounding Providence in the Theology of the Creator" explains this point thoroughly, noting that the debates attempting to reconcile God's eternal causative knowledge and will with genuine human freedom and responsibility fail to address the meaning of the Creator in the first place. Hoonhout asserts that "God acting as God, with full authenticity to the dynamics and perfections of his own essence, is not the negation of the order of our reality, but the very condition of its possibility and realization. In other words, God must operate in the world not in some reduced capacity, but to the fullest extent, as it were, of his nature and powers, if the world is going to be a providential creation." (Micheal A. Hoonhout, "Grounding Providence in the Theology of the Creator: The Exemplarity of Thomas Aquinas," *The Heythrop Journal* 43 (2002): 3.)

<sup>9</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, 62.

that we only know about providence under God's revelation, and within the limits of human comprehension. However, one must also not hasten to conclude the incomprehensibility of God's acts because of His clear desire to reveal Himself throughout history. This means that while antinomy would always be true to some extent, it would not be sufficient to hide behind antinomy without continuing to strive towards better understanding of providence itself. Besides, the scriptures show that God is a God who wills to reveal Himself, accommodating in ways to allow men to seek and understand Him within their own limitations. Nevertheless, antinomy always resides at the back of our minds, for it is not without human capabilities to know and understand God in His entire fullness and totality.

### 3. Providence – A Quick Survey

We have seen that we need to understand God under His own nature. In the midst of the numerous theologians who discussed providence, I shall select to discuss a few representing viewpoints which are in line with the foundations of providence mentioned above.

Under the Reformed tradition, God's providence is characterized as a threefold work encompassing His upholding of creation, cooperation with all created things, and guidance of all towards His ultimate purposes.<sup>10</sup> Reformed theologians also emphasize the importance of the covenant between God and mankind in history. Helm asserts that God unilaterally binds himself to act in certain ways by covenant promise.<sup>11</sup> This means that providence contains within itself a covenantal character consistent across history and inherited from history.

Thomas Aquinas was one of these theologians who saw God as the perfectly active God with full authenticity.

---

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Wirt Farley, *The Providence of God*, (Michigan: Baker, 1988), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, 102.

His view of providence put God as the primary cause of all things, but also sees Him acting concurrently with libertarian free agents who make their own choices.<sup>12</sup> Aquinas discussed providence under God's divine government, whereby God guides all things to their ultimate end in God Himself. He sees that "God wills some things to be done necessarily, some contingently, to the right ordering of things, for the building up of the universe".<sup>13</sup> Since he holds a contingent view with God acting in the eternal "now", foreknowledge is neither essential nor present. On the other hand, Augustine not only embraced free will but identified foreknowledge as the cause of it. God acts as the "cause of all causes" but not of all choices. Accordingly, Augustine said that God's election is based on His foreknowledge of human free choice.<sup>14</sup>

This brings us to the classical discussion of providence by John Calvin. Calvin placed great importance in the doctrine of election in his treatment of providence, although his discussion was in no way limited to it.<sup>15</sup> While his notion of compatibilism was the same with Aquinas, Calvin believed that God's comprehensive determination works with human freedom of a volition or voluntary nature.<sup>16</sup> Calvin moved from a more philosophical based discussion of providence to a greater emphasis on the biblical and Christian stands.

Karl Barth furthered Calvin's tradition in His discussion of divine providence by adding a stronger emphasis on the centrality of Christ.<sup>17</sup> In accordance with the reformed tradition, Barth looked at providence from the

---

<sup>12</sup> Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer* (Illinois: IVP, 2000), 178.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Prima pars*: question 19, article, quoted in Hoonhout, "Grounding Providence in the Theology of the Creator: The Exemplarity of Thomas Aquinas", 8.

<sup>14</sup> Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 184-5.

<sup>15</sup> Perkinson, "A Synopsis of Calvin's Doctrine of the Providence of God".

<sup>16</sup> Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 232.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

history of the Covenant, through God's sovereign will, to God's comprehensive and eternal foreknowledge. True freedom can be found only while acting in obedience to God, therefore no conflict results between free will and God's sovereignty.<sup>18</sup> In discussing the basis and form of providence, Barth emphasized not faith alone, but faith in Christ as the most important delimitation.<sup>19</sup> The lordship, election and covenant of grace all comes together in relation to the work of Jesus Christ. Barth's contribution in the study of providence resides not only in the Christological emphasis, but in the fact that his discussion penetrated the deep thoughts of those before him, synthesizing the viewpoints to a coherent presentation of the doctrine that enables understanding and practical application.

#### 4. Providence at Its Climax

God makes covenant with His people, plans and acts to redeem us through a magnificent design beyond all imagination. This supreme act of divine providence reaches its climax upon Jesus Christ's incarnation and redemption.<sup>20</sup> The greatest evil act of humankind, putting to death of God's messiah, was permitted by God Himself to attain His higher purpose. Through incarnation God not only revealed Himself through Jesus Christ, but attained the ultimate divine provision for all humankind.

Although the doctrine of providence was not formally established until later on, the shape and form of God's providence was apparent as early as the times of the church Fathers. Athanasius in his treatises "Incarnation of the Word" pointed out that the providence of God is revealed in Jesus Christ Himself. He referred to Christ as "distinct in being from the universe, and present in all things by His own

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 212-3.

<sup>19</sup> Barth, *CD*, III/3: 26-27.

<sup>20</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, 110-1.

power, -- giving order to all things, and over all and in all revealing His own providence... ”<sup>21</sup>

God’s foreknowledge is clearly stated by Peter as he minister on the day of Pentecost, that “this man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge...” (Acts 2:23). Jesus Christ resurrected and ascended to His Father in all glory and triumph. The dramatic events that led to the salvation of humankind, the greatest plan of God according to His own will and wisdom, are the ultimate acts of divine providence understandable and revealed to all humankind.

#### 5. A Reconciliation Exercise

Historically, many Christian doctrines have been developed through a struggle to eliminate inappropriate views under *theologia negativa*.<sup>22</sup> Besides deism and pantheism which were already discussed, providence should be distinguished from indeterminism under the risk model, and absolute determinism. It is also not a doctrine of chance or fatalism. Theologians embarked on a perennial debate in the attempt to reconcile the discrepancies among views of providence that raise questions about predestination, determinism and human freedom. God’s providence incorporates both human freedom and His will. On the surface this appears to be a contradiction. Nevertheless, in God’s wisdom He has embedded human free will as an essential pre-emption of love, within the context of His own sovereignty and foreknowledge. As a result, human bear

---

<sup>21</sup> Athanasius, “On the Incarnation of the Word”, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (2<sup>nd</sup> Series), Vol. IV, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Oden presents an outline of views opposing providence based on his own reformed theological standpoint. (Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 277-8.

responsibilities for their actions while such actions are within God’s will.<sup>23</sup>

We shall understand this paradox in the following way. No matter how we explain God’s acts, we cannot escape the loop imposed upon us. If we say that God’s foreknowledge necessitates a certain event to happen, we reach predetermination. If we say that God limits Himself to allow things to freely happen, then by the very act of self-limitation we are saying that God can but do not act. In such a way, God acts through His non-action. By insisting on absolute freedom outside of God’s foreknowledge, we are forced into the argument of total detachment from God’s knowledge. God’s knowledge becomes a contingent one, depending on our choice. However, it is difficult to say that God knows us better than we know ourselves yet He cannot foresee our choices. By the very nature of contingent knowledge, i.e. knowledge of all subsequent outcomes of all possibilities, we cannot escape the definition of God’s knowledge as foreknowledge in the first place.

Therefore, reconciliation comes from the realization of the true nature of free choice and a proper understanding of God’ foreknowledge. Foreknowledge does not equate necessity or predetermination. God knows by His own nature and greatness, but freely chooses whether to limit, reveal or act upon the foreknowledge. God also have foreknowledge of all possibilities of the outcomes contingent upon His choices. Similar to the free choice He granted to human beings, God retain His own free will in His entirety. It is under this sovereign rule that God shall choose act freely based on His own wisdom and will. By faith and through God’s revelation we peek at His wisdom beyond our comprehension. It is through this wisdom that God exercises His providence.

---

<sup>23</sup> 楊牧谷主編，〈當代神學辭典 CD 版〉，「Providence」。

Barth described providence carefully and affirmatively within God's sovereign rule by saying that whatever occurs throughout history not only took place under the lordship of God, but concretely under His directly effective will to preserve, His direct and superior co-operation, and His immediate action. Yet within this initiative lies God's will consists, in Barth's description, a "co-existence with the creature".<sup>24</sup> Through His wisdom God co-exists distinctly from human beings, within each party's own appropriate law and freedom. As a result of this design, the freedom and will of each participant is ensured.

To understand free choice within a context of God's foreknowledge, we need to acknowledge that although it seems a wide range of possibilities may be open to us for a given situation, the actual possibilities may be limited due to a combination of circumstances that we have no foreknowledge about. In addition, God knows us better than ourselves for He created and nurtured each individual under His providence. Consequently, God's foreknowledge lies in the fact that He already knows our choice before we make it. It is then in turn within God's free choice to intervene or not. To the earthly human whose wisdom and knowledge are highly limited when compared to God, the human does have free choice. This free choice is within the scope of our capabilities, but never outside of the knowledge and comprehension of the almighty God.

When this intersection is reached, the problem becomes the co-existence of free choice with determinism. Helm advocates compatibilism whereby free will is exhibited within the capabilities, resources and circumstances of men, allowing it to be compatible with determinism. If this is accepted, it follows that human accountability of one's own sins is also compatible with the permission to sin in the first

---

<sup>24</sup> Barth, *CD*, III/3: 13.

place.<sup>25</sup> This view is also consistent with Aquinas' who believed that god is the universal cause while the secondary agents themselves have freedom of choice in their acts.

Donald Bloesch asked us to view God's relationship to the world as "a compelling presence that engages all things".<sup>26</sup> He places God's providential rule in close relationship to Jesus Christ, a view in line with that of Karl Barth. Theologies also describe providence in terms of general and special providence. In general providence, God upholds and sustains the earth and all its beings. In special providence, God acts in history of His people and through Jesus Christ. Bloesch argued specifically against fate and chance, presenting providence as divine intervention in history that creates a new future for humankind.<sup>27</sup> Providence liberates and set people free to fulfill their destiny. Under the embrace of a loving God, we are able to enter into divine guidance and true freedom.

#### 6. Under God's Providence: A Biblical Illustration

As shown in His tolerance of events contradictory to goodness, God no doubt limits Himself in His acts while leaving enough freedom to His creation. In Elijah's times, God told the prophet that He "reserved for Himself seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him".<sup>28</sup> Yet God did not send the whole troop to work against the king. He selected for Himself the prophet Elijah, and showed His providence on Elijah in times of success as well as times of weakness.

---

<sup>25</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, 66-68.

<sup>26</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 113.

<sup>27</sup> Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, 114.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted from NIV, I Kings 19:18.

In the midst of the various possibilities confronting Elijah, the prophet went through a whole cycle of high and low points in his life. Did God know beforehand what Elijah will do? I propose “yes”. God’s foreknowledge meant that He knew the sequence of events that would follow after Elijah left Mount Carmel. Did God limit Himself to allow such events to happen? I also propose “yes”. However, did God predetermine the events? I propose “no”, because God allowed Elijah to make his own choice, just like God has chosen Elijah, with full foreknowledge about what Elijah would and would not do. God’s self-limitation does not necessitate risk. Similarly, God’s foreknowledge does not necessitate determinism. If we equate foreknowledge with determinism, we can equate self-limitation with determinism in the same way. This need not be so.

The apostle Paul went on to apply this same verse to God’s election in the redemption of His people. In Romans 11:2-10, he described the remnant of Israel chosen by grace. Those who believe were elected by grace, while the others were hardened. Here, when God limits Himself and not let His Spirit work in the hearts of men, men were hardened.

Fortunately, within God’s free will He exerted grace to elect those who receive the Holy Spirit and are saved under salvation. Does God predetermine who shall be saved? I propose “no”. Under His salvation plan, God predetermined that all those who believe shall be saved, but not the specific individuals on whether they should believe. Does God have the foreknowledge about who shall be saved? I propose “yes”, and that He also has the foreknowledge of the route and means through which the individual shall be saved. This does not mean that God necessarily intervene, but that he knows beforehand what would happen. To the individual who hears the gospel, he retains the freedom of choice to respond or to reject God, but before he answers, God already knows. God’s freely elects those whose hearts He pleases.

During these complex occurrences, God exercises His free choice, including His co-workers, ways and means. Sometimes God limits Himself, which is also part of His free will. God elects, God provides, and God cares. This is why we are able to look back on our lives and find the traces of God’s grace through His providence, continuing to guide us towards the greater good that He has prepared for us in eternity.

### **III. Providence Applied**

#### **1. Faith**

God’s providence is reflected in a personal way upon His care for each individual being. Faith in providence is essential for Christians to persevere through difficulties and to uphold Christian principles day by day.<sup>29</sup> It enables us to understand God’s work and provides the foundation for furthering our faith and foothold during times of adversity. Barth also emphasized faith within the belief of Christian providence. He said that providence teaches us to “be patient in adversity and thankful in prosperity, and that for the future we should have confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature will separate us from His love, because all creatures are in His hand, and none can stir or move without His will”.<sup>30</sup> As Farley suggested, providence is not the postulate of reason, science or philosophical position. It is a conviction of faith, based on revelation.<sup>31</sup>

In the will of God the Father, there is a purpose for each of His child, His children in aggregate, as well as nature and all His creations. When we speak of this will, we do not refer to the minute details of daily living, which falls under the natural created rules of the universe. Instead, we speak of the longing of a heavenly Father for His child to walk in a

---

<sup>29</sup> Oden, *The Living God*, 271.

<sup>30</sup> Barth, *CD*, III/3: 15.

<sup>31</sup> Farley, *The Providence of God*, 18.

path that is the best among all possibilities presented in free choice. Obviously, we are able and allowed to select the second or third best possibilities under God's point of view. If we do so, God in His all loving kindness and providence shall continue to bless us with all the possible abundance offered within such choice. Nevertheless, there are indeed various degrees of satisfaction contained within our choices. In Luke 10:42, Jesus spoke highly of Mary, who has chosen what is better, in contrast with Martha who was also serving Jesus in a blessed way. Martha's service was in no way unimportant. However, when compared with Mary who long for being with Jesus and listening to His teachings, Martha's acts become the second best. Since God knows us more than we know ourselves, He differs from our earthly parents in that His absolute knowledge and kindness ensures He wills what is best for us. We shall not fall into the trap of living on the fine line for fear of not walking in the path that God intends for us, because we know that sinful and dishonorable as we are, He shall continue to care and bless us provided that we preserve our hearts in faith. However, we shall also not fall into the other extreme of not recognizing that God knows the best path for us, and delights in His children discerning His will in our continuous strive to strengthen our relationship to our heavenly Father in our daily walk.

The ultimate call to the way of God evokes the response of surrender to the persuasion of love.<sup>32</sup> Through total surrender, we embark on a spiritual journey placing ourselves within the ultimate purpose of God, experiencing the true freedom under His providence. It is only under this condition that we experience true freedom – a total release from the earthly possessions, necessities and uncertainties that held us captive since birth. I often imagine this condition similar to that of freefall, when your body float

---

<sup>32</sup> E. Frank Tupper, *A Scandalous Providence* (Georgia: Mercer, 1995), 42.

airborne entirely out of your own control, yet comfortably and safely supported by the hands of God. Such a leap into God's hands of providence requires courage and faith.

## 2. Love

Indeed God presented us with His promises of providence. Jesus told us that God cares even for a sparrow.<sup>33</sup> “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” (Matt. 6:26). Clearly, God's providence goes down to tiny little things on an individual basis. In essence, the global plan of redemption and upholding of nature would be meaningless unless they are carried down to the level of care for each human being. God treasures every unique individual whom He created.

God is a relational God whose core nature is love. His love flows naturally in His providence. Ever since He initiated a covenantal relationship with man He has continued to lead and guide man to the restoration of goodness in eternity. Therefore, as we lead our daily lives, we do not live in loneliness and the wrath of sin, but with the guidance of the Holy Spirit in us. The love of God is magnified in His incarnation and indwelling of the Spirit in all who loves Him. Through love, He leads and guides us through the toils and labor of this world.<sup>34</sup>

## 3. Hope

God's providence reflects His love, and more so to those who love God. In addition to redemption, God's providence becomes outpouring blessings on Christians who love God and walk closely in His path. Paul told us that “...

---

<sup>33</sup> T.J. Gorringer, *God's Theatre: A Theology of Providence*, (London: SCM Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>34</sup> This paragraph is written with reference to lecture notes #3.

in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Rom.8:28) In Genesis, we read the history of the Jews, of Abraham who experienced the extraordinary grace and heritage that God provided for him and his nation. Within the doctrine of providence, the sovereignty of God becomes the hope and the console for those who love God.<sup>35</sup> The goodness of God, in His divine providence, is known in revelation, faith and hope, rather than by rational insight into the world of reason.<sup>36</sup> Today, Christians as those who love God also experience the grace and abundance of God’s providence. In His providence we live in hope for the future eternal glory in Christ. God who started the goodness of creation shall restore creation to its fullness, in glorification of His name.

#### 4. Prayer

Barth insisted again and again that the keynote of Jesus’ teaching on prayer is “ask”.<sup>37</sup> “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” (Matt.7:7) How then do we see petitionary and intercessory prayers under the doctrine of providence? Obviously, God does not grant all that we ask. Sometimes we see result contrary to what we ask for, while other times He fulfills our prayers in ways that we never thought of. Still other times we have almost forgotten our original requests before God starts fulfilling our wishes.

Helm asserts that in order for the idea of a request to make any sense, a personal relationship must be presupposed.<sup>38</sup> Indeed the ultimate purpose of prayers,

appear to lie in the relationship being built between sons and daughters with their heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ who continuously prays for us, and in the Holy Spirit that resides in us and teaches us to pray. Intercessory prayers draw us closer to the people for whom we pray, and allow us to participate in the acts of God within His will.

Under God’s providence, we begin to understand that prayers involve not asking or petitioning in our own words, but proper discernment of God’s will and where He is at work. This does not exclude us from being bold in our prayers, but requires us to build a dynamic relationship with our heavenly Father. Through prayers we get closer to the heart of our Father, because He takes pleasure in co-operating with us in His acts. His providence includes co-operating with us, not due to His own insufficiency, but that He grants His children the honor and blessings in working with Him, and in Him.

Providence is therefore manifested through the daily walk of our heavenly Father with us, in times of joy and in times of pain. When we go astray, God continues to reside patiently beside us, caring and longing for the return of our hearts. In prayers we actualize and experience His providence, and continue to grow spiritually as God reveals Himself to us through our daily walk in Him.

#### 5. Ultimate Concern

As Emil Brunner suggested, “revelation commands Christians to think of providence in personal terms.”<sup>39</sup> Within providence God governs the universe, down to the individual level of you and me. While we ponder on the meaning of true freedom and human choice, we must not leave out our task in returning to the will of our heavenly Father on our lives. As Barth describes it under his notion of aim or *telos*,

---

<sup>35</sup> 楊牧谷主編，《當代神學辭典 CD 版》，「Providence」。

<sup>36</sup> Ernst Niermann, “Providence,” in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, Edited by Karl Rahner (New York: Crowroad, 1975), 1315.

<sup>37</sup> Gorringe, *God’s Theatre: A Theology of Providence*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, 148.

---

<sup>39</sup> Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, 2:172-75, as quoted in Farley, *The Providence of God*, 46.

“God has an aim for the creature when He preserves and accompanies it. His preservation and accompanying are as such a guiding, a leading, a ruling, and active determining of the being and activity of all the reality which is distinct from Himself. He directs it to the thing which in accordance with his good-pleasure and resolve, and on the basis of its creation, it has to do and to be in the course of its history in time; to the *telos* which has to be attained in this history. It is He Himself who has set for it this *telos*, and it is He who as Ruler guides it towards this *telos*.”<sup>40</sup>

Like any father who desires greatness for his children, our heavenly Father knows us from before the knits of our wombs, and has designed a perfect plan for our lives within His providence. By returning to our call and aligning our ultimate concerns to His will, we live our lives in spiritual fullness as described by Jesus Christ, today and always.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

We only know God by proclaiming that He is God. Otherwise, we reduce prophecies into fortune-telling, and foreknowledge into fatalism. Upon the Fall of humankind, man becomes susceptible to sins and therefore abides by the twisted reality of this fallen world. Through volitional free will we choose to repent and return to God through the providence of His redemption for every believer of Christ. If we open our minds to let God be God, we could understand His providence through nothing but His own nature as

revealed to us. God’s providence is God’s accompanying. Not only does He leads and guides His people, but He is also the divine sustenance of all creation, governing and containing all the earth under His preservation order.

At a personal level, God’s providence enables us to dwell comfortably within His promises, knowing that He shall care and provide for all who loves Him. The understanding of providence triggers a call to total surrender, through which we experience true freedom and blessings in abundance. Our call is a call to discern the purpose of God in our lives, find out where and how He works, steering our prayers to cooperate with God in the way He wishes. Our relationship with God takes on a new step as we learn about the dynamic ways in which we participants and share in His work in the way He pleases.

God’s plan for humankind and acts throughout history continue within His own will, His methods all embracing of what we may synthesize into contingencies, primary/secondary causes, and miracles, all according to His will and within His almighty sovereignty. Little being such as us would marvel at the miraculous happenings of our times, while leaving unnoticed many of the natural tiny occurrences within the scope of His providence in our daily lives. Through God’s own revelation and His most significant reveal in Jesus Christ, we are able to take only a small peek at providence, a tiny step in our continuing strive to understand our almighty Creator, whose all encompassing richness remains beyond the scope of our imagination.

---

<sup>40</sup> Barth, *CD*, III/3:155, as quoted in Farley, *The Providence of God*, 43.