

**PROVIDENCE\*** God's activity throughout history in providing for the needs of human beings, especially those who believe in him.

**Significance of Providence** All through the centuries of human existence there have been those who took great comfort in God's providential care. God has not left this planet alone in the vast universe or forgotten for a moment the human situation. God visits, touches, communicates, controls, and intervenes, coming before and between people and their needs. Providence is ground for thankfulness.

**Counterfeit Concepts of Providence** The fact that the nonbelieving world has so many erroneous ideas about providence proves that this is an immensely realistic issue. At the heart of every nonbiblical proposal about providence is the denial of the personhood of God. In its place stands some cold principle or force dominating man and clashing with his life. It may be all-pervasive or local. It may be rational or irrational, consistent or arbitrary. False providences include:

**Fate** Countless numbers of people have believed themselves to be trapped by a sometimes fickle and always foreboding fate. "As fate would have it," they say.

**Luck** Life is indeed fortuitous at times. Optimists speak of "fortune," or less solemnly of "luck." But then, since this is all so impersonal, fortune-tellers arose, and someone dreamed up "lady luck."

**Serendipity** This is the term used by the one who takes credit for unintentional discoveries of good things along the way in life. But he refuses to acknowledge that God was there before him and so he does not give thanks.

**History** Some Marxist propagandists have championed their cause by saying, "History is on our side." They were appealing to a supposed inevitability of future events that would lead to a Communistic world. "History" in such a statement appears to have taken on a divine dimension. Likewise, when American leaders have affirmed a "manifest destiny" for the United States to be the superior power in the Western hemisphere or in the world at large, the same kind of reasoning is employed.

**Progress** The development of science and technology, education and social evolution, and territorial conquests have made some people believers in progress as something more than what is seen. Until the two world wars, there was the illusion of a relentless momentum pushing upward and onward forever. In some respects, progress is but providence by another name, but not to the degree that people assume for themselves the glory that belongs to God.

**Nature** Men like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau of 19th-century New England attributed to nature the gifts of providence. But nature is impersonal and abstract.

**Natural Selection and the Survival of the Fittest** Charles Darwin's classic on biological evolution, *The Origin of the Species*, appeared in 1859. It popularized two relatively new theories. For millions of people, the mysterious decisions behind "natural selection" intrigued the thoughtful more than the notion of God's providence. And the idea that "the fit survive" necessarily makes providence altogether unnecessary.

These counterfeit views compete with the idea of God's providence. Of course, they cannot all be true. Nor can they satisfy the inquirer whose personhood calls insistently for a personal providence that reflects a knowledge of his individual needs and uniqueness. Only the Christian doctrine of providence provides that.

**Biblical Meaning of Providence** Providence is basically God's provision for the needs of people on time. The classic statement is found in Abraham's confession of faith in his life's most difficult test. He was under the duress of God's command to provide something he could not afford—his son in sacrifice. He struggled with the dilemma of losing his son or losing God's friendship. In answer to Isaac's question about a sacrifice for God, Abraham exclaimed, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (Gn 22:8, NIV). The word "providence" means literally "to see before," and therefore by implication to do something about the situation. In this case, there was already upon Mt Moriah a suitable sacrifice, "a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns" (v 13). The unbelieving analysis of that situation would understand only that through an ordinary process an animal had become entangled in dense underbrush, and coincidentally Abraham and Isaac happened to arrive on the scene. But to believing Abraham, who was led for three days toward that one point in time and space in desperate need of a divine provision, it was altogether clear to him that God, by whatever process, had stationed the ram at the place of sacrifice for his use. "Provision" and "providence" are coordinately related to their verbal root, "provide," and are essentially and etymologically the same. However, they are theologically distinguished in usage by providence's having come to mean divine provision on the basis of foresight.

The great text on providence in the NT is also set in a context of sacrifice pleasing to God. Paul had reason to commend the Philippians' sacrificial support of his missionary work. To them he stated his unbounded confidence in the providential care of God: "This same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19, NLT). The sacrifice of Christ Jesus for us confirms the doctrine of providence with a most reasonable certitude. What God initially required of Abraham but did not ultimately require (the sacrifice of his son), he required of himself and did fulfill two millennia later. It is God's nature to supply, to foresee man's need and to provide for him.

**Providence and the Nature of God** Immediately following his reassuring words to the Philippians about the treasury of providence ("his riches in glory"—Phil 4:19), the apostle Paul wrote a doxology to God "our Father" (v 20). Providence is appropriately pictured in the fatherhood of God. His fatherhood is the attribute, and providence is the act that expresses it. Fathers provide and guide. Fathers construct conditions of opportunity for children without crowding their freedom. They exercise governance in a context of caring. Providence, therefore, as an activity of God, flows naturally from God's fatherly nature.

*See also* Foreordination; God, Being and Attributes of<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). In [Tyndale Bible dictionary](#) (p. 1092). Tyndale House Publishers.