

Prayer and Divine Providence

by E.M. Bounds

Prayer and divine providence are closely related, and God's providence has to do with every aspect of our lives.

Scripture: Psalm 34:7, Psalm 139:1-4, Proverbs 3:5-6, Isaiah 46:10, Matthew 6:26, Matthew 10:29-31, Romans 8:28, Philippians 4:6-7, James 1:17, 1 Peter 5:7

Topics: "Prayer", "Divine Providence"

Description

E.M. Bounds emphasizes the inseparable relationship between prayer and divine providence, asserting that prayer invites God's intervention in human affairs and that providence is the outcome of prayer. He explains that God's providence is a direct oversight of all creation, ensuring that nothing occurs by chance and that every event is under His control. Bounds argues that both general and special providences are essential, and that God's care extends to the smallest details of life, encouraging believers to trust Him in all circumstances. He illustrates this with biblical examples, highlighting that prayer is a means through which God's providence is activated, and that even in suffering, God's hand is at work for the good of His people. Ultimately, Bounds calls for a childlike trust in God's providence, reminding believers that nothing is beyond His notice or care.

Transcript

PRAYER and the divine providence are closely related. They stand in close companionship. They cannot possibly be separated. So closely connected are they that to deny one is to abolish the other. Prayer supposes a providence, while providence is the result of and belongs to prayer. All answers to prayer are but the intervention of the providence of God in the affairs of men. Providence has to do specially with praying people. Prayer, providence, and the Holy Spirit are a trinity, which cooperate with each other and are in perfect harmony with one another. Prayer is but the request of man for God through the Holy Spirit to interfere in behalf of him who prays.

What is termed providence is the divine superintendence over earth and its affairs. It implies gracious provisions which Almighty God makes for all his creatures, animate and inanimate, intelligent or otherwise. Once we admit that God is the creator and preserver of all men, and concede that he is wise and intelligent, we are logically driven to the conclusion that Almighty God has a direct superintendence of those whom he has created and whom he preserves in being. In fact, creation and preservation suppose a superintending providence. What is called divine providence is simply Almighty God governing the world for its best interests, and overseeing everything for the good of mankind.

Men talk about a "general providence" as separate from a "special providence." There is no general providence but what is made up of special providences. A general supervision on the part of God supposes a special and individual supervision of each person, yes, even every creature, animal and all alike.

God is everywhere, watching, superintending, overseeing, governing everything in the highest interest of man, and carrying forward his plans and executing his purposes in creation and redemption. He is not an absentee God. He did not make the world with all that is in it, and turn it over to so-called natural laws, and then retire into the secret places of the universe having no regard for it or for the working of his laws. His hand is on the throttle. The work is not beyond his control. Earth's inhabitants and its affairs are not running independently of Almighty God.

Any and all providences are special providences, and prayer and this sort of providences work hand in hand. God's hand is in everything. None are beyond him nor beneath his notice. Not that God orders everything which comes to pass. Man is still a free agent, but the wisdom of Almighty God comes out when we remember that while man is free, and the devil is abroad in the land, God can superintend and overrule earth's affairs for the good of man and for his glory, and cause even the wrath of man to praise him.

Nothing occurs by accident under the superintendence of an all-wise and perfectly just God. Nothing happens by chance in God's moral or natural government. God is a God of order, a God of law, but nonetheless a superintendent in the interest of his intelligent and redeemed creatures. Nothing can take place without the knowledge of God.

His all surrounding sight surveys

Our rising and our rest;

Our public walks, our private ways,

The secrets of our breasts.

Jesus Christ sets this matter at rest when he says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not, therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows."

God cannot be ruled out of the world. The doctrine of prayer brings him directly into the world, and moves him to a direct interference with all of this world's affairs.

To rule Almighty God out of the providences of life is to strike a direct blow at prayer and its power. Nothing takes place in the world without God's consent, yet not in a sense that he either approves everything or is responsible for all things which happen. God is not the author of sin.

The question is sometimes asked, "Is God in everything?" as if there are some things which are outside of the government of God, beyond his attention, with which he is not concerned. If God is not in everything, what is the Christian doing praying according to Paul's directions to the Philippians?

Be careful for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.

Are we to pray for some things and about things with which God has nothing to do? According to the doctrine that God is not in everything, then we are outside the realm of God when "in everything we make our requests unto God.

Then what will we do with that large promise so comforting to all of God's saints in all ages and in all climes, a promise which belongs to prayer and which is embraced in a special providence: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God"?

If God is not in everything, then what are the things we are to expect from the "all things" which "work together for good to them that love God"? And if God is not in everything, in his providence what are the things which are to be left out of our praying? We can lay it down as a proposition, borne out by Scripture, which has a sure foundation, that nothing ever comes into the life of God's saints without his consent. God is always there when it occurs. He is not far away. He whose eye is on the sparrow is also upon his saints. His presence which fills immensity is always where his saints are. "Certainly I will be with thee," is the word of God to every child of his.

"The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him and delivereth them." And without God's permission, nothing can touch those who fear God. Nothing can break through the encampment without the permission of the captain of the Lord's hosts. Sorrows, afflictions, want, trouble, or even death, cannot enter this divine encampment without the consent of Almighty God, and even then it is to be used by God in his plans for the good of his saints and for carrying out his plans and purposes:

For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

These evil things, unpleasant and afflictive, may come with divine permission, but God is on the spot, his hand is in all of them, and he sees to it that they are woven into his plans. He causes them to be overruled for the good of his people, and eternal good is brought out of them. These things, with hundreds of others, belong to the disciplinary processes of Almighty God in administering his government for the children of men.

The providence of God reaches as far as the realm of prayer. It has to do with everything for which we pray. Nothing is too small for the eye of God, nothing too insignificant for his notice and his care. God's providence has to do with even the stumbling of the feet of his saints:

For he shall give his angels charge concerning thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.

Read again our Lord's words about the sparrow, for he says, "Five sparrows are sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God." Paul asks the pointed question, "Doth God care for oxen?" His care reaches to the smallest things and has to do with the most insignificant matters which concern men. He who believes in the God of providence is prepared to see his hand in all things which come to him, and can pray over everything.

Not that the saint who trusts the God of providence, and who takes all things to God in prayer, can explain the mysteries of divine providence, but the praying ones recognize God in everything, see him in all that comes to them, and are ready to say as John said to Peter at the Sea of Galilee, "It is the Lord."

Praying saints do not presume to interpret God's dealings with them nor undertake to explain God's providences, but they have learned to trust God in the dark as well as in the light, to have faith in God even when "cares like a wild deluge come, and storms of sorrow fall."

"Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." Praying saints rest themselves on the words of Jesus to Peter, "What I do thou knowest not now but thou shalt know hereafter." None but the praying ones can see God's hands in the providences of life. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," shall see God here in his providences, in his Word, in his church. These are they who do not rule God out of earth's affairs, and who believe God interferes with matters of earth for them.

While God's providence is over all men, yet his supervision and administration of his government are peculiarly in the interest of his people.

Prayer brings God's providence into action. Prayer puts God to work in overseeing and directing earth's affairs for the good of men. Prayer opens the way when it is shut up or straitened.

Providence deals more especially with temporalities. It is in this realm that the providence of God shines brightest and is most apparent. It has to do with food and raiment, with business difficulties, with strangely interposing and saving from danger, and with helping in emergencies at very opportune and critical times.

The feeding of the Israelites during the wilderness journey is a striking illustration of the providence of God in taking care of the temporal wants of his people. His dealings with those people show how he provided for them in that long pilgrimage.

Day by day the manna fell,

O to learn this lesson well!

Still by constant mercy fed,

Give me, Lord, my daily bread.

Day by day the promise reads,

Daily strength for daily needs;

Cast foreboding fears away,

Take the manna of today.

Our Lord teaches this same lesson of a providence which clothes and feeds his people in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, "Take no thought what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on." Then he directs attention to the fact that it is God's providence which feeds the fowls of the air, clothes the lilies of the field, and asks if God does all this for birds and flowers, will he not care for them?

All of this teaching leads up to the need of a childlike, implicit trust in an overruling providence, which looks after the temporal wants of the children of men. And let it be noted specially that all this teaching stands closely connected in the utterances of our Lord with what he says about prayer, thus closely connecting a divine oversight with prayer and its promises.

We have an impressive lesson on divine providence in the case of Elijah when he was sent to the brook Cherith, where God actually employed the ravens to feed his prophet. Here was an interposition so plain that God cannot be ruled out of life's temporalities. Before God will allow his servant to want bread, he moves the birds of the air to do his bidding and take care of his prophet.

Nor was this all. When the brook ran dry, God sent him to a poor widow, who had just enough meal and oil for the urgent needs of the good woman and her son. Yet she divided with him her last morsel of bread. What was the result? The providence of God interposed, and as long as the drought lasted, the cruse of oil never failed nor did the meal in the barrel give out.

The Old Testament sparkles with illustrations of the provisions of Almighty God for his people, and shows clearly God's overruling providence. In fact the Old Testament is largely the account of a providence which dealt with a peculiar people, anticipating their every temporal want, which ministered to them in emergencies, and which sanctified to them their troubles.

It is worth while to read that old hymn of Newton's, which has in it so much of the providence of God:

Though troubles assail, and dangers affright,
Though friends should all fail, and foes all unite,
Yet one thing secures me, whatever betide,
The promise assures us, the Lord will provide.
The birds without barns, or storehouse are fed,
From them let us learn, to trust for our bread;
His saints what is fitting, shall ne'er be denied,
So long as it's written, the Lord will provide.

In fact, many of our old hymns are filled with sentiments in song about a divine providence, which are worthwhile to be read and sung even in this day.

God is in the most afflictive and sorrowing events of life. All such events are subjects of prayer, and this is so for the reason that everything which comes into the life of the praying one is in the providence of God, and takes place under his superintending hand. Some would rule God out of the sad and hard things of life. They tell us that God has nothing to do with certain events which bring such grief to us. They say that God is not in the death of children, that they die from natural causes, and that it is but the working of natural laws.

Let us ask what are nature's laws but the laws of God, the laws by which God rules the world? And what is nature anyway? And who made nature? How great is the need to know that God is above nature, is in control of nature, and is in nature! We need to know that nature or natural laws are but the servants of Almighty God who made these laws, and that he is directly in them, and they are but the divine servants to carry out God's gracious designs, and are made to execute his gracious purposes. The God of providence, the God to whom the Christians pray, and the God who interposes in behalf of the children of men for their good, is above nature, in perfect and absolute control of all that belongs to nature. And no

law of nature can crush the life out of even a child without God giving his consent, without such a sad event occurring directly under his all-seeing eye, and without his being immediately present.

David believed this doctrine when he fasted and prayed for the life of his child, for why pray and fast for a baby to be spared, if God has nothing to do with its death should it die?

Moreover, "does God care for oxen," and have a direct oversight of the sparrows which fall to the ground, and yet have nothing to do with the going out of this world of an immortal child? Still further, the death of a child, no matter if it should come alone as some people claim by the operation of the laws of nature, let it be kept in mind that it is a great affliction to the parents of the child. Where do these parents come in under any such doctrine? It becomes a great sorrow to mother and father. Are they not to recognize the hand of God in the death of the child? And to them is there no providence or divine oversight in the taking away of their child? David recognized the facts clearly that God had to do with keeping his child in life; that prayer might avail in saving his child from death, and that when the child died it was because God had ordered it. Prayer and providence in all this affair worked in harmonious cooperation, and David thoroughly understood it. No child ever dies without the direct permission of Almighty God, and such an event takes place in his providence for wise and beneficent ends. God works it into his plans concerning the child himself and the parents and all concerned. Moreover, it is a subject of prayer whether the child lives or dies.

In each event of life how clear,

Thy ruling hand I see;

Each blessing to my soul most dear,

Because conferred by thee.

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