

Of the Providence of God

by Thomas Boston

God's providence is a sovereign control that reaches to the smallest details, guiding and superintending all events and circumstances for His holy ends.

Scripture: Psalm 103:19, Proverbs 16:33, Proverbs 21:1, Matthew 10:29, Acts 17:28, Romans 4:19, Hebrews 1:3, Hebrews 13:5, James 1:13

Topics: "Gods Providence", "Divine Sovereignty"

Description

Thomas Boston preaches on the providence of God, emphasizing how God's care extends even to the smallest details of creation, such as sparrows. He explains that providence involves preserving and governing all creatures and their actions, with God overruling even sinful actions for a good end. Boston urges believers to trust in God's wisdom, power, and holiness, and to submit to His will in all circumstances, avoiding sin and anxiety while relying on God's provision and guidance.

Transcript

Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.
- Matt. 10:29

Our Lord is here encouraging his disciples against all the troubles and distresses they might meet with in their way, and particularly against the fear of men, by the consideration of the providence of God, which reaches unto the meanest of things, sparrows and the hairs of our head. Sparrows are of a mean price and small value; and yet, for as mean as they are, God preserves them, guides and disposes of all things concerning them, so that one of them cannot fall to the ground by shot or any other way, without his sovereign ordering and disposal.

The instruction deducible from the text is,

Doctrine. "There is a providence that extends itself to the least of things.

In discoursing from this doctrine, I shall.

I. Shew that there is a providence.

II. Consider its object.

III. Explain the acts thereof.

IV. Consider its properties.

V. Lastly, . make improvement.

I. I am to shew that there is a providence. This appears,

From plain scripture-testimonies; as Psalm 103:19. "His kingdom ruleth over all." Acts 17:28. "In him we live, and move, and have our being," Eph. 1:11. "Who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." Providence is also held forth by a threefold scripture-emblem. Chiefly, (1.) Mount Moriah, which upon occasion of the miraculous preservation of Isaac, and a ram to be put in his room in order to be sacrificed, was called JEHOVAH JIREH, i.e. The Lord will provide, Gen. 22:14. (3.) Ezekiel wheels, where there was a wheel in the middle of a wheel, denoting the agency of the first cause, and the superintending and directing providence of God, Ezek. 1.

From the nature of God, who being independent, and the first cause of all things, the creatures must needs depend upon him in their being and working. He is the end of all things, wise, knowing how to manage all for the best; powerful to effectuate whatever he has purposed; and faithful to accomplish all he has decreed, promised, or threatened.

From the harmony and order of the most confused things in the world. Every thing appears to a discerning eye to be wisely ordered, notwithstanding the confusions that seem to take place. What would become of the world, if there were not a providence seeing men that despise all order, and would fain give loose reins to their lusts and unbridled inclinations, are always the greatest party. and would overpower and destroy the smaller and most virtuous party? Herein the truth of providence clearly appears. The extraordinary judgments that have pursued and been inflicted upon wicked men, and the remarkable deliverances that have been granted to the church and people of God in all ages, do loudly proclaim a providence.

From the fulfilment of prophecies, which could not possibly be without a providence to bring them to pass.

II. Let us, in the next place, consider the object of providence, or that which it reacheth and extendeth to. And this is all the creatures, and all their actions, Heb. 1:3. --"Upholding all things by the word of his power," Psalm 103:19. "His kingdom ruleth over all." The angels are subject to this providence, Neh. 9:6. "Thou, even thou art Lord alone, thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all things that are therein, the seas and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all, and the host of heaven worshippeth thee." So are also the devils, these infernal spirits, Matt. 8:31, "If thou cast us out (said they to Jesus), suffer us to go away unto the herd of swine." It reacheth natural things, as clouds, snow, winds, &c. as appears from Psalm 104, 147. and from daily observation. Casual things are ordered by providence, as lots, Prov. 16:33. "The lot is cast into the lap: but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord." So in the case of accidental manslaughter, Exod. 21:13. "If a man lie not in wait, and God deliver him into his hand." There is nothing so mean but providence extends to it, such as the falling of a sparrow, and the numbering of the hairs of our head. It is God that feeds the fowls and the young ravens that cry. He clothes the lilies and grass of the field, that have no hand of man about them. He made lice, frogs, &c. a plague to scourge Pharaoh and his people, worms to eat up Herod, &c. In a special manner providence is conversant about man, forming him in the womb, "Hast thou not poured me out as milk (says Job), and curdled me like cheese? Thou hast clothed me with flesh and hast fenced me with bones and sinews," Job 10:10, 11. --bringing him forth out of his mother's bowels, and holding him up thereafter, Psalm 71:6. His

heart is in the Lord's hand, and all his thoughts and inclinations are under his control, Prov. 21:1. He directs and orders all his steps. The most free acts of the creature's will are governed by superintending providence. All their good actions, John 15:5. "Without me ye can do nothing." So also their evil actions, Acts 4: 27, 28. "For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done," Gen. 45:7. "God sent me before you," says Joseph to his brethren, though they had wickedly sold him into Egypt.

III. I proceed to consider the acts of providence. They are two, preserving and governing the creatures and their actions.

God by his providence preserves all the creatures. This preservation of the creatures is an act of providence, whereby they are preserved in their being and power of acting, Job. 1:3. "Upholding all things by the word of his power." In this God sometimes makes use of means, and sometimes acts without means. We have both described, Hos. 2:21, 22. "I will hear saith the Lord, I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth, and the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil, and they shall hear Jezreel." He preserves the heavens immediately, the earth, the corn, the wine, and the oil, &c. mediately. And thus by this providence he provides all things necessary for the preservation of all things; Psalm. 145: 15, 16. "The eyes of all wait upon thee, and thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing." This act of providence is so necessary, that nothing could subsist one moment without it. For there is no necessary connexion betwixt the being of the creatures this moment and their being the next; and as they could not give themselves a being, so they cannot continue it, but must be upheld by God as a ball in the air, Heb. 1:3. There is a continual efflux of providence necessary for preserving and upholding the creatures in their being, otherwise they would be independent, and could preserve themselves, which is grossly absurd.

God does not only preserve the creatures, but governs and manages them, which is the second act of providence; whereby he disposes of all things, persons, and actions, according to his will, Prov. 21:1. "The King's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will, Prov. 26:33. "The lot is cast into the lap: but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord." Chap. 16:9. "A man's heart deviseth his way; but the Lord directeth his steps."

And this act of providence is also necessary: for as the creature cannot be or exist without God, so neither can it act without him, Acts 17:21. "For in him we live, and move, and have our being." God does not make man as the carpenter doth the ship, which afterwards sails without him; but he rules and guides him, sitting at the helm, to direct and order all his motions: so that whatever men do, they do nothing without him: not only in their good actions, where he gives grace, and excites it, working in them both to will and to do of his good pleasure: but also in their evil actions, wherein they are under the hand of Providence, but in a very different manner.

For understanding this point, how the providence of God reacheth to and is concerned in sinful actions, we are to consider, that God neither puts evil into the hearts of men, nor stirs them up to it: for, says the apostle, Jam. 1:13. "God cannot be tempted with evil; neither tempteth he any man." And therefore he is not the author of sin. But, God permits sin, when he does not hinder it, which he is not obliged to do. not that it falls out so as he cannot hinder it, for he is omnipotent, and can do all things; nor yet as if he cared not what fell out in the world; but he does wisely, for his holy ends, efficaciously will not to hinder it; Hence we read, Acts 14:16. that "God in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways."

He does not permit sin, for that he will not violate or force the creature's free will; for God's providence offers no violence to the will of the creature; and if so, he should never hinder sin at all, for the same reason. But certainly he has holy ends in the permission of sin: for thereby his justice, mercy, wisdom, and love, in sending his Son to save sinners, do conspicuously appear, which otherwise would have been under an eternal cloud, hid from the view of men and angels.

For further illustration of this doctrine relating to the concern of providence in sinful+ actions, we are to consider them in a twofold respect, as simple actions, or natural actions of the creature, abstract from any obliquity or deformity cleaving to them; and as actions having irregularity and pravity in them. Considered as natural actions of the creature, they are all effected by the providence of God, which co-operates with, and enables the creature to produce them, in such a manner that without the efflux of providence the creature could not move a hand or foot, or perform any action whatever; "for in him we move:" and no action of the creature simply considered, or as a natural action, can be sinful, but has a goodness of being in it, and is effected by the influence of providence.

As to the pravity or sin that is in actions, as God decreed the futurity of sin, or permitted it to take place, and did not hinder it; so all the sin or vitiosity that is in actions proceeds entirely from the creature, and the evil lusts and passions that are in his heart.

Thus a man's taking up a stone, and throwing it, is a natural action, which the providence of God enable him to perform; but his throwing it at another man with an intention to kill him, is permitted by God, otherwise it could not take place; for if a hair cannot fall from our head without the providence of God, much less can a man be murdered without it: and the killing of the man by the throwing of the stone, proceeds entirely from the malice and wickedness that was in the heart of the murderer, the operation of which God did not hinder, which he is nowise obliged to do.

God leaves the sinner so far as he sees meet to the swing of his own lusts, and denies him restraining grace. Thus it is said of Hezekiah, a godly king, that, "in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto him to enquire of the wonder that was done in the land, God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart," 2 Chron. 32:31. And when the restraint is taken off the sinner, he runs furiously, to evil.

God bounds sin, and restrains men in their sins, as he does the raging sea, allowing it to go so far, but no further. He has such a power and command over wicked men, that they are not masters of their own affections and dispositions, but many times act quite contrary to what they had firmly resolved and proposed: as in the case of Laban. He pursued Jacob, when he left Padan-aram, in order to return into his own country, with a wicked intention to do him hurt, by robbing him of his wives, children, and cattle; but the Lord restrained him, and influenced him to enter into a covenant of friendship with the good patriarch, Gen. 32. Thus Esau had resolved on Jacob's death, and went out to meet him with a purpose to destroy him; but when providence brought them together, it is said, "Esau embraced Jacob, and fell on his neck, and kiss him." Thus Balaam came with an express intention to curse Israel, and yet he fell a blessing them. Thus he bent the hearts of the Egyptians to favour the Israelites, so that they sent them away with great riches, by lending them jewels of silver and jewels of gold, and costly garments. Thus, by a secret instinct, he turned Jehoshaphat's enemies away from him, when they came with a purpose to destroy him, 2 Chron. 18:31; and at another time he turned his enemies against themselves, so that they sheathed their swords in one another's bowels, 2 Chron. 20. Thus also he restrained the soldiers that broke the legs of the two thieves that were crucified with Christ, from not touching his, in order to accomplish his word, that

a bone of the paschal lamb, which was a type of Christ, the Lamb of God, should not be broken. So true is that saying of the Psalmist, Psal. 76:10. "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain." God has a bridle in the mouths of wicked men, when they are under the most impetuous fury of their lusts, to turn them as he will, restraining and curbing in respect of some, and giving swing to others.

Lastly, God over-rules all to a good end. God has one end in wicked actions, and the sinner another. The sinner minds and intends evil, but God means and designs good by them all. So Joseph's brothers, in their cruelty selling him for a slave, meant evil to the poor youth; but God, in that dispensation meant it for good, and brought much good out of it to Joseph, and his father and brethren. Thus the Jews crucified Christ out of malice against him; but God by that crucifixion intended satisfaction to his justice for the sins of men, and the redemption and salvation of an elect world. Thus God brings good, the greatest good out of the worst of evils. What greater evil or more atrocious wickedness can be imagined, than the violent death of the innocent Son of God, who went about doing good, and was holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners? and yet what a rich and astonishing good resulted therefrom, even glory to God, and peace and goodwill towards men!

IV. Our next business is to consider the properties of divine providence.

God's providence is most holy, Psalm 145:7. "The Lord is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works. Even though providence reach to and be conversant in sinful actions, yet it is pure; as the sun contracts no defilement, though it shine on a dunghill. For God is neither the physical nor moral cause of the evil of any action, more than he who rides on a lame horse is the cause of his halting. All the evil that is in sinful actions proceeds and flows from the wicked agent, as the stench of the dunghill does not proceed from the heat of the sun, but from the corrupt matter contained in the dunghill.

It is most wise, Isa. 28:29. "This cometh forth from the Lord of hosts, who is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working." Infinite wisdom always proposes the most excellent ends in all its operations, and uses the best methods for accomplishing its ends. However perplexed confused, and void of wisdom providential administrations may appear to us poor mortals of narrow, shallow capacities, yet they are the result of the highest wisdom and the deepest counsel, as proceeding from and directed by him whose name is the only wise God, and cannot but manage all things with the greatest understanding. And the day will at last come when it shall be said by the untied voice of the whole assembly and church of the first-born, that God hath done all things well: and then the plan of providence will appear in every respect to have been most wise, harmonious and consistent.

Providence is most powerful. Hence the Lord says to Sennacherib, the king of Assyria "I will put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest," II Kings 19:28. "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will." Who can resist his will which is almighty? He can never fail of his end, but all things fall out according to his decree, which is efficacious and irresistible.

I shall conclude with an use of exhortation.

Beware of drawing an excuse for your sin from the providence of God; for it is most holy, and has not the least efficiency in any sin you commit. Every sin is an act of rebellion against God; a breach of his holy law, and deserves his wrath and curse; and therefore cannot be authorised by an infinitely-holy God, who is of purer eyes that to behold iniquity without detestation and abhorrence. Though he has by a permissive

decree allowed moral evil to be in the world, yet that has no influence on the sinner to commit it. For it is not the fulfilling of God's decree, which is an absolute secret to every mortal, but the gratification of their own lusts and perverse inclinations, that men intend and mind in the commission of sin.

Beware of murmuring and fretting under any dispensations of providence that ye meet with; remembering that nothing falls out without a wise and holy providence, which knows best what is fit and proper for you. And in all cases, even amidst the most afflicting incidents that befall you, learn submission to the will of God; as Job did, when he said, in consequence of a train of the heaviest calamities that happened to him, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord," Job 1:21. In the most distressing case say with the disciples, "The will of the Lord be done, Acts 21:14.

Beware of anxious cares and diffidence about your throughbearing in the world. This our Lord has cautioned his followers against, Matt. 6:31. "Take no thought (that is, anxious and perplexing thought), saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?" Never let the fear of man stop you from duty, Matt. 10:28, 29.; but let your souls learn to trust in God, who guides and superintends all the events and administrations of providence, by whatever hands they are performed.

Do not slight means, seeing God worketh by them; and he that hath appointed the end orders the means necessary for gaining the end. Do not rely upon means, for they can do nothing without God, Matt. 4:4. Do not despond if there be no means, for God can work without them, as well as with them; Hos. 1:7. "I will save them by the Lord their God, and will not save them by bow, nor by sword, nor by battle, by horses, nor by horsemen." If the means be unlikely, he can work above them, Rom. 4:19. "He considered not his own body now dead, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb." If the means be contrary, he can work by contrary means, as he saved Jonah by the whale that devoured him. That fish swallowed up the prophet, but by the direction of providence, it vomited him out upon dry land.

Lastly, Happy is the people whose God the Lord is: for all things shall work together for their good. They may sit secure in exercising faith upon God, come what will. They have ground for prayer; for God is a prayer-hearing God, and will be inquired of by his people as to all their concerns in the world. And they have ground for the greatest encouragement and comfort amidst all the events of providence, seeing they are managed by their covenant God and gracious friend, who will never neglect or overlook his dear people, and whatever concerns them. For he hath said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee," Heb. 13:5.

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