

# God and Providence: Providence, Prayers, or Miracles?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

## Introduction:

- A. There is danger in swallowing the sectarian concepts of Providence.
  - 1. That God is constantly setting aside His natural laws in order to make a good life in this world for every believer.
  - 2. That God acts on behalf of no one; He is a cosmic watchmaker who created all things and set events in motion and sits back watching it run
  - 3. When God does not provide in accord with one's expectations, he becomes disillusioned and loses his faith, or foolishly ascribes to God that which one cannot know.
  - 4. A man totals his car, breaks both legs, while lying there bleeding a thief steals his wallet, ambulance attendants drop him on his head giving him a concussion, but he survives all of that and says, "The Lord was with me today." A cynic rightfully asks, "Why didn't He spare you from the wreck in the first place?"
- B. Trying to decide for one's self, without the scriptures, exactly where God has intervened in life, is like a blind man trying to locate a black cat on a moonless cloudy night.
  - 1. It will lead to discouragement and error. The problem with ascribing every good thing to God's active providence is that it becomes natural to blame Him with bad things happen.

## I. PROVIDENCE OR PRAYER?

- A. Prayer and divine providence are closely related, so close that they are difficult to separate. When we humbly petition our God in prayer, we do so believing that He will hear and provide for us what we ask.
  - 1. Prayer is an act of faith. Prayer is the request of man to God to act on behalf of the one who prays.
  - 2. We pray not to inform God, but to let Him know what He already knows. We pray, because we need Him.
  - 3. Prayer is an expression of our belief that God will hear us as individuals, and it testifies that we believe He loves us individually will answer our individual petitions.
    - a. 1John 5:14-15; James 1:5-8
  - 4. "While God's ultimate purposes, are unchangeable, His immediate will is flexible and open to change through the prayers of his people. A personal God, Who loves and cares, can be solicited in prayer. Prayer works because God makes Himself attentive to and open to responding to the requests of his children" (Donald Bloesch, Essentials of Evangelical Theology [Harper & Row, 1978, vol. 2, p. 57, & vol. 1, p. 31])
  - 5. "Prayer changes events and circumstances, not merely the one praying. No one should succumb to the error of viewing prayers as simply a means of changing the individual and his attitudes rather than changing events, circumstances, and history itself. Certainly prayer changes me:

my outlook, orientation, and attitudes. But prayer also changes those situations and circumstances of life which are distinctly separated from any change which may take place in the individual who prays" (Harold Lindsell, "When You Pray" [Tyndale, 1969], p. 11).

B. Providence is our conviction that God will take care of all of His creation apart from our prayers, and that in particular He will take care of us as His children apart from our prayers.

1. Psalm 37:23-25; Matt. 6:25-30

C. There is a relationship between providence and prayer

1. We pray, believing that God hears and answers our prayers.

2. And, we believe that God has always cared for us and has provided for our most important and spiritual needs before we have prayed or when we have overlooked a need in our prayers.

3. The place where both prayer and providence meet is in our faith

a. Phil. 4:4-7; 1Peter 5:7

## II. PROVIDENCE OR MIRACLE?

A. Miracles may be the top three most misunderstood Bible principles among denominational ministers today.

1. Oral Roberts began his show with "something good is going to happen to you today; expect a miracle in your life."

2. Jerry Falwell simply said to "expect a miracle."

3. They are both advocating present day suspension of Divinely ordained spiritual and natural law.

4. Many people, both in the doctrines of men and even in the Lord's Church, believe that miracles have happened to them at some point in their own lives.

5. When people express the belief that miracles are still happening or have happened to them, they have misunderstood or misapplied Bible teaching on miracles.

6. Also, those who refuse to accept God's purposeful role in our world today greatly misunderstand and misapply Bible teaching on Divine Providence.

7. The Bible teaches that miracles do not happen today, but that God has a deliberate role in our world today through what He has provided.

B. Defining miracles

1. The English word "miracle" comes from the Latin word "miraculum," meaning to marvel or wonder.

2. English definition would be any phenomenon, whether supernatural or natural, that causes one to marvel or wonder.

3. Our usage of miracle to describe a great natural event or an unlikely occurrence has created this misunderstanding of Bible miracles, for the Bible does not use miracle to characterize natural or unlikely events.

C. The Bible's definition of miracle comes from the Greek word "dunamis" from which we get the word dynamite. It means "power, inherent ability, used of

works of a supernatural origin and character, such as could not be produced by natural agents and means" (Vines).

1. Semeion is "a sign, a mark, a token" (Vines). "A sign, portent, or unusual occurrence that transcends the common course of nature; miracles and wonders by which men prove that the cause they are pleading is God's" (Thayers).
2. Teras is translated "wonders." "A prodigy, miracle, or wonder causing the beholder to marvel" (Thayer).
3. The Bible's usage of miracle is thus: "A supernatural event performed by God to confirm His word.
4. The Old Testament teaches that miracles were used to reveal and authenticate the revelation of spiritual truth.
  - a. Exodus 4:1-9, 29-31 - Moses.
  - b. 1Kings 18:36-39 - Elijah on Mt. Carmel.
  - c. Dan. 3:28-29 - The three in the furnace.
  - d. Dan. 5:21-22 - The handwriting on the wall.
5. New Testament teaching is that miracles were used to confirm the truth.
  - a. John 10:37-38, 20:30-31; Heb. 2:2-4
6. Miracles were not performed for personal benefit, period.
  - a. 2Cor. 12:7-10; 2Tim. 4:20

D. Miracles have ended with the end of revelation

1. Does their experience that they call a miracle fit the purpose of miracles: to reveal and confirm truth?
  - a. It could not, for all truth has been revealed - Jude 3.
  - b. Any new revelation is a false doctrine - Gal. 1:8-9.
  - c. If their miracle was not to reveal and confirm truth, then it was not a miracle.
2. Does the experience they call miracle fit the Bible's criteria for miracles?
  - a. Visible to others? They have to be explained to others.
  - b. Immediate? Actually occurs at the rate of natural events.
  - c. Infallible? Every single one can be debated.
  - d. Investigable? Impossible to present proof.
  - e. Since the event cannot meet the Bible's definition of miracle, it was not a miracle.

E. "If there are no more Bible miracles happening, how do you explain what happened to me?"

1. Providence. God has provided for us through means of His divinely ordained spiritual and natural laws and by way of answered prayers.
2. The actual vehicle of Providence can be guessed at or believed in, but not proven by limited human understanding.
3. Miracles do not happen today, but Providence does.

F. Providence, not miracles

1. God's Providence is defined as "that preservation, care, and governing which God exercises over all things that He created, in order that they may accomplish the purpose for which they were created."(ISBE, Vol. 4, p. 2476)

#### G. Dividing providence from miracles

1. Both have a supernatural origin: GOD.
2. Both are part of the care God has shown for His people.
3. Miracles are no longer with us today; God's providence is.
4. Difference between them is in the agencies through which they operate
  - a. Miracles come through supernatural means.
  - b. Providence comes through Divinely ordained law: spiritual law, natural laws, and answered prayers based on God's promise to care for His creation and His children

### III. PROVIDENCE: NEITHER PRAYERS NOR MIRACLES

#### A. Can one know when providence has operated?

1. We do not know for certain and cannot know for fact.
2. The only way we know that God operated providentially is where it is revealed in the Bible that He worked through some other means.
  - a. As there is no Divine revelation today, we cannot know for certain when or how He has operated.
  - b. We can think we know or have a conviction by faith, but it cannot be proven beyond the fact that God has promised to help us, and we believe in His care for us.
3. Our part is not to figure out how and when God has worked, but to believe that He does work - Ecc. 3:11; Deut. 29:29
4. "The impossibility of empirical proof of the providential operation of God is a spiritual necessity. A man who knew empirically that an event had been caused by his prayer would feel like a magician. His head would be turned and his heart corrupted. The Christian is not to ask whether this or that event happened because of his prayer. He is rather to believe that events are answers to prayer, whether they are grantings or refusals. He must believe that the prayers of all concerned and their needs have been taken into account" (Miracles, C. S. Lewis, p. 180).

#### B. The comfort of providence

1. Many people today mistakenly believe in miracles, often encouraged by misguided religious leaders.
2. Yet, God still is in control and works in our world through providence: the operation of spiritual law, natural law, and answered prayers.
3. We must believe that God does care and has provided for us to accomplish His divine will.
4. From this faith, the Christian can draw comfort and strength in this life.
5. 1Peter 5:6-11