

November 3, 2019

GOD'S PROVIDENCE AND HUMAN FREEDOM  
*(9 of 12 on the doctrines of Scripture and of God)*

So, last week we saw that God exercises meticulous providence over his world. He sustains his creation, and exercises his providence over the physical world, animals, nations, man's birth and lot in life, things that seem accidental or insignificant, the care of believers, and the carrying out of the Great Commission. And we could have listed more. And we also saw that God exercises his providence over man and his actions. So, we cited, for example that God kept Abimelech from sinning, turns the king's heart wherever he wants, had Herod and Pilate act according to his plan, and is willing and doing in us according to his good pleasure.

But that produces a question for us, doesn't it? And we might ask it a number of ways, but the question (however it is asked) will revolve around the issue of human freedom. Is man free? Do we as human being actually have freedom? Do we actually make significant decisions? This is what I want to look at this morning – the issue of human freedom.

### **Human Freedom?**

So, we can see that the text again and again suggests God's meticulous providence in the lives of his free creatures. But, what then do we mean by "free"? Well, there have been two ways of understanding freedom traditionally. The first is an understanding of freedom that is called "Contra-causal" or "Libertarian" freedom. This understanding of freedom says that man is free only if we could have chosen to do otherwise. So, for example, if God's purpose is that we do "x" in order to fulfill his purposes and plans, then we are only free if we can do "x" or "not-x" ("y" maybe). So, in this understanding, if God controls our actions, then we are not free.

How then do people who hold to libertarian freedom understand God working in the world, carrying out his purposes and plans? How do they understand God's providence? There are perhaps many ways, but three have risen to the top.

#### *Classical Arminianism*

The Arminian position says that God has simple foreknowledge. That is, God looks down the scope of time, sees what his free creatures are going to do, and because he has foreknowledge of what will happen, he is able to work powerfully in the world.

But there are two problems with this. First, this actually leaves God powerless to work in the world. The reason this is the case is because if God actually knows something, then it cannot be anything other than what he knows. For example, if I knew the Cardinals were going to win the World Series, and I were all-powerful, would that give me the ability to change it so that the Rangers win the World Series? It might seem like the answer would be, "Yes." I knew what was going to happen, and I'm all-powerful. What's the problem? The problem is that if I know there

Cardinals are going to win the World Series, then the Cardinals must win the World Series, otherwise, I didn't have accurate knowledge. So, simple foreknowledge would leave God knowing what's coming but powerless to do anything about it.

Second, it actually doesn't leave the individual in the moment with the opportunity to do either "x" or "non-x" in the given situation. If God knows, for example, before the foundation of the world that I was going to marry Lili, then was there any possibility that I would not marry Lili? No. If God knew it accurately (which all God's knowledge is accurate and perfect), then there was no choice but that I was going to marry Lili.

Perhaps a third problem is that the Bible presents God's plan and *hand* working out his plans. He moves the king's heart.

### *Molinism (or Middle Knowledge)*

Now, without getting into the technical details for why this is called "middle" knowledge, the idea is that God not only knows not only what will happen in the world but what *would happen* under different circumstances. For example, Jesus says in Matthew 11:21, "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."

You see? God the Son knows what Tyre and Sidon would have done if the situation had been different. He knows what would be the actions of his free creatures under different circumstances. So, the position holds that God, knowing what every circumstance would bring about in the actions of his free creatures, then he determines certain circumstances, knowing that it will bring about particular free actions, and then his purposes are fulfilled, and he utilizes the circumstances that bring about the particular best situation for every individual. Thus, when an individual does evil, for example, it must be because there were no circumstances under which he would have done good.

There are two problems with this view as well. The first is that it really doesn't uphold libertarian freedom. Again, it's the same problem as in Arminianism. If God knows what you would do, then your action is certain, and in the moment, it is impossible for you to do other than what God knows you will do. So, the version of freedom you're fighting so hard to uphold (which is the goal in this system) is actually not upheld.

Second, the very text we looked at to support God's knowledge of what would happen under different circumstances actually proves that God doesn't work circumstances to bring about the good in every individual. He actually tells us that there was a circumstance which would have brought about repentance in Tyre and Sidon. If miracles had been done there, they would have repented. But there weren't miracles done there, and they didn't repent.

### *Open Theism*

This view understands the weaknesses of the previous views in noting that they fight so hard to uphold the notion of libertarian freedom and actually destroy it. Again because if God knows what his free creatures will do in any moment and if God's knowledge is perfect and accurate, then his creatures are not free in the libertarian sense because in that moment they must do what God knows they will do and cannot do otherwise.

What then is their solution? Well, you might have guessed it. They conclude that God does not know the future actions of his free creatures.

The problem with this view is that though they rightly understand the weakness of the previous positions, they have to go against overwhelming biblical evidence that God knows the future actions of his free creatures. In fact, in Isaiah 40-41, it is actually God's knowledge of everything that will happen that God points to in order to show that he is God and idols are not.

So, is there then another view? Yes.

### *The Traditional View*

The traditional view of God's providence and man's actions is built upon a different understanding of freedom. This view rejects contra-causal or libertarian freedom and instead holds to compatibilistic freedom. In this view, freedom is defined as the ability to do that which one most wants to do. So, when we talk about mankind being free, what we're saying is that every one of us always does what we most want to do. Never do we make a decision that is not what we most want to do.

And the reason it's called "compatibilistic" freedom is because it's compatible with God's absolute meticulous providence in man's lives. D. A. Carson has given a nice statement of what compatibilism is, writing:

"The Bible as a whole, and sometimes in specific texts, presupposes or teaches that both of the following propositions are true:

1. God is absolutely sovereign, but in his sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.
2. Human beings are morally responsible creatures – they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent."<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, in this view, God has the ultimate determination in what we do, and yet it is also true to say that we determine what we do. This is a both-and understanding of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. We freely do what God determines that we do.

---

<sup>1</sup>D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 201.

So, for example, this classical understanding of Herod and Pilate doing what God's plan and hand predestined to take place (Acts 4:28) would be that they did the very thing God's plan determined that they would do *and* they did the very thing they most wanted to do.

And if you define freedom according to man doing that which he most wants to do, then we must acknowledge that the Bible upholds both God's meticulous providence and man's freedom. But what do we say about God's providence when man chooses to do evil actions? We'll look at that next week.

*(to be continued . . .)*