

DIVINE PROVIDENCE and HUMAN SUFFERING

- 1) **THIS FOLLOWS FROM THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION** - The Bible teaches not only did God *create* this world, but He *maintains* it. The Christian faith is not *deistic*. Deism teaches that God initially set the wheels of creation in motion and then removed Himself from any future activity in His world.

God's concern is not only for His creation in general, but for each individual creature (see **Matthew 10:29-30**). His providence extends to the individual elements of His creation.

- 2) **DIVINE PROVIDENCE EXTENDS TO THE GIFT OF ONGOING LIFE** - **Colossians 1:17** - "And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." This is the *unseen* powerful work of Jesus Christ. So great is His sustaining work that, remove Him, and everything else you see evaporates. See also **Hebrews 1:3**, and **Nehemiah 9:6**. We need to pause more often and consider the *beating of the heart*, the *circulation of the blood* and the ongoing work of the entire *respiratory system* - all of which function without conscious effort on our part. We don't always see these as miraculous operations.

- 3) **PROVIDENCE EXTENDS TO THE PROVISION FOR NEEDS** - God not only created man. He planned for his sustenance (**Genesis 1:30**). This provision *continued even after the fall* (Genesis 3:17-18). Even though post-fall Adam would have to *labour* for his bread, the point is, *he could never grow anything without the hand of God bringing it about*. See **Psalm 145:15-16** - "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. [16] You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing."

This gracious provision is extended to *both the just and the unjust* - **Matthew 5:45** - "....For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" The purpose of divine providence is always *redemptive* - **Acts 14:17** - "Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." See this again in **Romans 2:4** - "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" This is usually referred to as God's *general providence* and would apply especially to the material in *points 2 and 3*.

- 4) **PROVIDENCE INCLUDES PROTECTION FROM EVIL** - **Psalm 91** pronounces special protection for the one "*who dwells in the secret place of the Most High*." The rest of the Psalm is an expansion of this theme. Remember too the words of **Psalm 23:5** - "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*."

- 5) **GOD'S PROVIDENCE, EVEN WHEN NOT OBVIOUS IS CONSISTENT IN WORKING FOR OUR ULTIMATE GOOD** - If God were not big enough to work with our failures *the Bible could have ended in Genesis 3:6*. Despite God's goodness, man sinned. Despite man's sin God's purpose remained unfrustrated. *Satan's head would still be crushed* (**Genesis 3:15**). God would not be thwarted.

God's providence extends in His Lordship over history - **Acts 17:24-27** - "[24] The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, [25] nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. [26] And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, [27] that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us...." He has the capacity to use nations and circumstances to draw men and women to himself. See also **Genesis 50:20** where God uses even *evil intentions* to accomplish his *good ends* - "*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today*."

- 6) **IF GOD'S PROVIDENCE IS REAL, WHY IS THE WORLD IN SUCH A MESS?** - How can we reconcile all that has been said with the plain fact of *human pain and suffering*? We will look at *three reasons* why suffering is a necessity even in a world marked by God's providential care:

- a) **Some suffering is due to the kind of world God has made** - If the world is to be *consistent* it must be marked by real laws and rules. Think of the law of gravity. God created it and it works consistently. How terrible it would be if the law suddenly changed in the middle of your trans-Atlantic flight! But the same law, if it works consistently, dictates that a heavy rock dropped on my toe will result in pain. This is true even before the entry of sin through the fall. If Adam stepped on a jagged stone, would he have felt any discomfort? That kind of pain is *not* necessarily the result of sin. It is the necessary result of living in a world of *solid objects*. To avoid that kind of suffering God would have to cancel the law of gravity - but if He did that, what would hold Adam and Eve firmly to the earth's surface?

The same fire that warms and cooks food must naturally burn fingers. Two solid cars that meet in the same intersection must

crash. This is not because of sin. It's because of the reality of matter.

- b) ***Some suffering is the tragic result of man's sin*** - In this case, suffering is not due to the kind of world God made. It is due to the tragic Fall of God's entire creation. This is spelled out in **Genesis 3:14-19** - "[14] The Lord God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. [15] I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.' [16] To the woman he said, 'I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.' [17] And to Adam he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; [18] thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. [19] By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

"The woman's punishment struck at the deepest root of her being as wife and mother, the man's strikes at the innermost nerve of his life: his work, his activity, and provision for sustenance" (G. von Rad, "Genesis").

NOTE - Because of man's sin ***the earth itself has also been in travail***. See **Romans 8:20-22** - "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope [21] that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. [22] For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now." Weeds, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, etc. continue to mar the good creation work of God.

NOTE ALSO - Not all suffering is ***directly*** due to personal sin - **Luke 13:1-5** - "There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. [2] And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? [3] No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. [4] Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? [5] No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Then again, some suffering ***is*** due to personal sin - **Galatians 6:7** - "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap."

- c) ***Suffering is necessary in the life of faith*** - **First, suffering proves the genuineness of our faith** - **1 Peter 1:6-7** - "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, [7] so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Peter says suffering is a proving process that deepens trust. **Second, suffering deepens character** - **Romans 5:3-4** - "[3] More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, [4] and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." Like it or not, we simply learn more from pain than from pleasure. **Third, suffering is promised in the form of persecution** - **2 Timothy 3:12** - "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...." And finally, **suffering is to deepen our compassion for others in need** - **2 Corinthians 1:3-5** - "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, [4] who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. [5] For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too."