

PROVIDENCE

The name of this Biblical concept comes from the account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. When Abraham and Isaac went together to the place of sacrifice, Isaac asked a pertinent question: "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (Gen. 22:7, NKJV). Abraham answered, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering" (v. 8). Later, the angel of the Lord stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son, though he was in the very act of doing so. Abraham looked and saw "a ram caught in a thicket by its horns" (22:13). After offering it to the Lord, he named that place "Jehovah Jireh," meaning "The-Lord-Will-Provide" (v. 14).

God has always worked providentially in the lives of His people. At times He worked miraculously throughout the Old Testament; certainly miracles, signs, and wonders were in operation during the lifetimes of Jesus and His apostles. But God's providence has always been in operation whether or not miraculous manifestations were in evidence.

The question people often want to know is: "How does God work providentially?" Is such a question answerable? We might ask a number of questions about the ram Abraham espied. "Was it there when the patriarch and his son arrived, or did God miraculously put it there (create one on the spot or transport an already-existing ram to that location)?" "Could the animal have simply wandered there at the right time, or did God specifically guide it there?" These questions cannot be answered without more information, which God did not give us. Such is the wonder of providence. In eternity we may know precisely what was accomplished on our behalf at various times, but here we can only speculate. It is an exercise in foolishness to insist that anyone explain precisely how God operates in our best interests; God is far cleverer than men.

Christians must be open to the possibility that God is working providentially without being dogmatic. After King Ahasuerus issued the order, which was designed to exterminate the Jews, Mordecai informed Esther that she needed to plead for her people (Est. 4:8). She balked at this request, because to approach the king meant putting her life on the line. Mordecai further implored her to act, assuring her that she and her father's house would not be above the coming destruction. Then he asked her a pointed question: "Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:14).

In other words, he wanted her to consider the possibility that she had reached the exalted state of beloved wife to the king for a reason. What other Jew had access to this powerful man? Who else with any credibility could perhaps alter the unjust decree that Haman, in his emotional wrath, had obtained from the king? Mordecai's observation means that we must be open to the possibility that we are where we are for a reason. He did not tell her with certainty, "That's the reason you're there. Do something." But it was an idea that merited consideration.

As to refraining from saying, "I know that God providentially arranged this situation," even the inspired apostle Paul wrote to Philemon of his runaway slave Onesimus' conversion: "For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose" (v. 15). Paul did not insist he see it that way, but he wanted Philemon to consider that option.

How does God bring things about? Only He knows. That He does so is beyond dispute (Rom. 8:28; 1 Pet. 5:10). Mortals—even Christian mortals—are not privy to the workings of God. We do not need to know the means by which He provides. We need only to be open to the idea that we are where we are for a purpose—to do something constructive for the kingdom.

— Gary Summers
Winter Park, FL