

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by beginning to examine the providence of God. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to begin?

Dr. Spencer: I'd like to begin by examining the back of a one-dollar bill.

Marc Roby: Well, that's an unusual way to begin.

Dr. Spencer: But there is an important point to make by doing so. If you look at the back of a United States dollar bill, you will notice an unfinished pyramid on the left side. The pyramid has the first thirteen layers finished, which represent the original thirteen states and the bottom layer has the date 1776 written on it in Roman numerals in honor of our Declaration of Independence. The fact that the pyramid is unfinished represents the potential for growth. If you look above the pyramid you will see an eye floating above it. This eye is called the eye of Providence and represents God. It is enclosed in a triangle, which is a symbol for the Trinity and it has rays of light emanating from it, which represent the glory of God. Finally, there are two mottos written in Latin. The one above the pyramid says *Annuit cœptis*, and means that Providence, or God, has approved our undertakings. In other words, it expresses the idea that God approved of the founding of this country. Our founding fathers were declaring independence from England, but not independence from God. The motto below the pyramid says *Novus ordo seclorum*, which means a "new order of the ages".¹

Marc Roby: I'm quite sure that very few Americans know this, even though they all use dollar bills regularly.

Dr. Spencer: I'm confident you're right about people not knowing, I'm less confident that everyone actually uses paper money regularly. But the important point I want to make is that when our country was founded, the idea of God's providence was common. Many of our most prominent founding fathers were *not* born-again Christians as is sometimes claimed, but most of them *did* believe in God and most also believed in the idea of providence.² One can certainly debate exactly what some of them meant by providence, but there was a common notion that events in this world were governed in some way by an intelligent, powerful and good God.

Marc Roby: And that view continued to be the norm for quite some time.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly did. If you look at letters to and from soldiers in the Civil War for example, they often speak about Providence. For example, one father of a soldier in the

¹ E.g., see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Seal_of_the_United_States

² They have been called deists by many, but the most common view is that deists cannot believe in providence (e.g., on page 270 of his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem states the common view of the God of Deism as a watchmaker who makes and winds the clock and then steps back and lets it run). The World Union of Deists however says that some deists do believe in providence (see http://www.deism.com/deism_defined.htm). While this question may be interesting, I chose not to discuss it because it is of little value, it is really an issue of definitions. It is clear from their writings that many of our founding fathers believed in Providence, although it is unclear precisely what some of them meant by that term. Whatever they meant however, it is incompatible with their writings to equate it to the modern idea of chance or fate.

Confederate army wrote the following to his son when he first joined the army; “War is a tremendous scourge which Providence sometimes uses to chastise proud and wicked nations.”³ And I should point out that the word Providence in that sentence is capitalized, it was being used as a name for God.

Marc Roby: That reminds me Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. He famously quoted Matthew 18:7, where Jesus tells us, “Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!”⁴ And then Lincoln said that “If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove; and that He gives to both north and south this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope — fervently do we pray — that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”⁵

Dr. Spencer: That is a marvelous quote. It would be so wonderful to hear a modern president speak that way. Lincoln was acknowledging that God was in control of the Civil War and that it might very well be his judgment for the evil of slavery. In other words, he was aware of a Sovereign God who providentially rules and judges the affairs of men. And I should point out that at the end, when he said that “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether”, he was quoting from Psalm 19:9 in the King James Version.

We could give many more examples, but my previous statement is true; it was the common view from the founding of this country up through most of the 19th century that events in this world were governed by an intelligent, powerful and benevolent God.

Marc Roby: Which is very different from the common modern view that the world is ruled by chance.

Dr. Spencer: And modern is *not* always right or better! Chance is a useful word, but we need to be careful how we use it and how we think about it. There is, in the final analysis, no such thing

³ J. William Jones, *Christ in the Camp; The True Story of the Great Revival During the War Between the States*, Sprinkle Publications, 1986, pg. 30

⁴ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

⁵ <https://cdn.loc.gov/service/mss/mal/436/4361300/4361300.pdf> (you can even view Lincoln’s handwritten original [see pages 6 & 8, the backs of the pages are also shown] here: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mal.4361300/?sp=8&r=-0.184,0.113,1.299,0.645,0>)

as a chance event. We are told in Proverbs 16:33 that “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”

Marc Roby: And, of course, casting a lot was the Old Testament equivalent of rolling the dice or flipping a coin.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. God knows, and in fact controls, how the dice will roll or the coin will flip. There are no accidents or chance events in God’s universe. We need to be careful about our thinking and even about the expressions we use. They reflect and affect our thinking far more than we might realize. For example, if someone is in a bad car accident and walks away from it uninjured, we might be tempted to say they were very lucky, or very fortunate. But what is luck? And what is fortune?

Marc Roby: My Webster’s dictionary says that luck is “the things that happen to a person because of chance.” And it defines fortune as “something that happens by chance.”⁶

Dr. Spencer: Which, of course, begs the question, what is chance?

Marc Roby: Well, if we look in Webster’s again, we find that it says chance is “the way that events happen when they are not planned or controlled by people.”⁷

Dr. Spencer: I like that definition a lot. Notice that it is a negative definition, by which I mean it doesn’t really say what chance *is*, it says what chance is *not*. To say that something “happens by chance” means that it was *not* planned or controlled by *people*. It does *not* mean that it was not planned or controlled at all. In other words, you can’t give a positive definition of chance, you can’t really tell me what it *is*, because it is nothing. It is a word that expresses our ignorance about, or inability to control, the cause of something. If someone walks away from a bad car accident uninjured, the real reason is that God chose that outcome.

Marc Roby: And that brings us back to the providence of God.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. The Westminster Shorter Catechism gives us a good, biblical definition of providence in the answer to Question 11, which says that “God’s works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.”

Marc Roby: I love that short definition. But I think a lot of modern Christians don’t believe that God controls *any* of the details of life, let alone all of them. They somehow think of God as only being interested in the big issues, not the details.

Dr. Spencer: That is, without doubt, the most common view today. But it is illogical and unbiblical. To see that it is illogical, you only need to realize that God cannot control or guarantee the big things if the little things, the details of life, are somehow outside of his control

⁶ Merriam-Webster dictionary app for Android phone, Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2019

⁷ Ibid

or notice. We cannot trust any of God's promises if there is any detail of creation that is outside of his control. Let me illustrate that by an example.

Marc Roby: Okay, please do.

Dr. Spencer: On January 28, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger blew up, killing all seven people on board. The cause of the catastrophe was a small rubber O-ring on the solid rocket booster that didn't seal properly because of the cold temperature at launch time. This illustrates how a tiny detail can govern a major catastrophe. I could give many more examples, but I think everyone knows this to be true if they think about it for a few minutes.

Marc Roby: And yet, you often hear Christians say things that imply some details of life are simply too small for God to bother with. For example, they may say something like, "God is too busy with important matters to worry about whether I buy this car or that car."

Dr. Spencer: You do hear that kind of view being expressed, but it is, again, profoundly wrong. In the case of which car we buy, there are all kinds of things that might matter. For example, can I afford both of them? Is one of them far more practical for my needs? If so, why do I want the other one? Is it because it strokes my ego?

Marc Roby: Are you suggesting that I shouldn't buy that new Ferrari I was looking at?

Dr. Spencer: We can talk about that later. But, seriously, I'm not saying we *always* have to buy the most economical thing that will meet our needs, I don't believe that is true. But God cares about our motives and reasons for the decisions we make, not just the decisions themselves.

I like what Charles Hodge wrote in answer to this objection. He wrote that "The common objection to the doctrine of a universal providence, founded on the idea that it is incompatible with the dignity and majesty of the divine Being to suppose that He concerns himself about trifles, assumes that God is a limited being; that because we can attend to only one thing at a time, it must be so with God. The more exalted are our conceptions of the divine Being, the less shall we be troubled with difficulties of this kind."⁸

Marc Roby: That gets right to the heart of the matter. If we have any understanding of the infinite wisdom, knowledge and power of God, we will realize that he is not limited like we are. He doesn't need to neglect details in order to focus on the more important matters.

Dr. Spencer: No, he doesn't. And, as I illustrated earlier, the details can be extremely important. It is simply illogical to think that God can, for example, bring about his plan of salvation if he can't control the details. Look at the crucifixion of Christ as the most important example. God provided us with numerous prophecies in the Old Testament about this most important event in human history. It is utterly inconceivable that he could have brought it to pass in fulfillment of those prophecies if any of the details were outside of his control.

⁸ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. 1, pg. 583

Marc Roby: Yes, that is obvious when you think about it. Major events depend on a myriad of small details. I think we've shown that this view is illogical, but you said it is also unbiblical. We already quoted Proverbs 16:33 about the lot that is cast being determined by God. What other Scriptures would you cite to back up your statement?

Dr. Spencer: The first one I would cite is from Exodus Chapter 21, where Moses is giving the people specific laws and regulations after having just told them the Ten Commandments in Chapter 20. As a part of these detailed laws God deals with the difference between killing a man deliberately or accidentally.

Marc Roby: Which is sometimes difficult to discern if there are no witnesses.

Dr. Spencer: In fact, it can be impossible to discern. And God allows for that fact in a way that illustrates his great wisdom. In Exodus 21:12-13 we read that "Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God lets it happen, he is to flee to a place I will designate."

Notice two things in this statement: First, if a man kills someone unintentionally, it is because God let it happen. There are no accidents, God is in control of every detail. That is the main thing I want to illustrate for now. But we can also take a very brief digression to point out God's wisdom in dealing with this situation. And so, the second thing we note is that the man is to flee to a place that God will designate.

Marc Roby: Which we are told in Numbers 35 are certain cities, designated as cities of refuge.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. God provided places to which a person could flee to ensure that that person is given a fair trial, rather than being dealt with as a murderer without any due process. A specific example is given in Deuteronomy 19 of two men working in the forest cutting wood and the head of one man's axe comes off and kills the other man. That man can flee to a city of refuge rather than being put to death as a murderer⁹. But, and here is where God's wisdom is manifest; as you noted, if there are no witnesses, it can be very difficult to determine exactly what happened. There may be other evidence, but there will be cases where we simply can't be sure if the man is guilty or not. So, in Numbers 35:25 the people were told that if the accused man is not found guilty, he shall not be put to death, but he also doesn't go completely free, he must stay in the city of refuge until the death of the current high priest.

Marc Roby: In other words, there was punishment of a sort even if the man was found to not be guilty of murder.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And I think that is a marvelous display of God's wisdom. It means it was not possible for a man to murder someone, make it look like an accident, and not be punished at all. But it also made sure that if the killing were accidental, the man was not treated as a murderer, but he would still receive some punishment so that people would be careful. We are

⁹ Deut 19:5

responsible if someone else is injured or killed due to our negligence, even if we didn't intend to harm that person.

Marc Roby: That does illustrate God's wisdom. But, as you noted, for our purpose today, the main point was that there are no accidents. It only happened because God let it happen. What other evidence can you give to support the statement that it is unbiblical to think that there are any details outside of God's control?

Dr. Spencer: In Matthew 10:29 we read that Jesus said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father." Now a sparrow falling to the ground is not exactly a major world event, but Jesus tells us it cannot happen apart from the will of God.

In addition, in the next verse, Matthew 10:30, Jesus goes on to say, "And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." Now, this does *not* say that God determines the number of hairs, so one could argue it only illustrates his perfect and exhaustive knowledge, but it certainly illustrates that there is no detail too small for God to pay attention to.

Marc Roby: The number of hairs on our heads is about as trivial a detail as I can think of. But it depends on whose head you're looking at, the number of hairs on some heads is far more trivial than others.

Dr. Spencer: That's very true, but let's be kind. There are many other passages we could cite as well, but I think this is a good place to end for today. So, let me remind our listeners that we encourage them to email questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.

Marc Roby: You took the words right out of my mouth. I look forward to continuing this discussion next time.