

# Pilgrims in Providence:

## Does God Have a Wonderful Plan for My Life?

**A**s if it weren't challenging enough to live by the Ten Commandments and the two Great Commandments (see Matt. 22:34–40), somewhere along the line someone decided that we also needed an additional "Four Spiritual Laws." So now, right after "God so loved the world," many Christians add, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." But is this "spiritual law" found in Scripture? This is an important question because many—from Herodotus following the thread of fate in history through Neo attempting to understand his preprogrammed life in the Matrix—have believed there is a master plan guiding human history. People are comforted by the idea that their lives are meaningful because they are parts of a larger plan or a greater purpose than what currently meets the eye.

Some Christians may think that belief in a predetermined plan is equivalent to belief in God's sovereignty. But belief in determinism and belief in a divine determiner are quite different. We should zealously maintain this difference, especially when we consider questions regarding God's will for our lives and the doctrine of providence.

Bare determinism is a form of fatalism, making fate and destiny the decisive factors instead of God. In other words, bare determinism subverts the idea that God is personally and actively "preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their

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actions" (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 11; cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 27). In theological discussions of providence, we may refer to God as the "primary" or "first cause" among "secondary causes" in order to avoid pantheistically confusing God and creation. Yet this language can mislead us by tempting us to think primarily in philosophical categories and not according to biblical doctrine. Scripturally, any notion that removes or depersonalizes God or lessens his active involvement in his creation with his creatures falls short. For Christians, it is not just a matter of traveling the course set before us and simply following God's commands. There is also the matter of our trusting our loving heavenly Father because we know that God is continuously guiding, leading, protecting, sustaining, and watching over each of us in special ways.

Yet fear, uncertainty, and confusion can often, as G. C. Berkouwer observes, "whelm up with remarkable force in the hearts of believers"—con-

sider Job, the Psalms, and Ecclesiastes. And then we may find ourselves asking, "Does God have a plan for my life?" and "Can I know God's will for me?" Questions like these concern God's providence and the sovereignty of his will. We understand a portion of God's will because God has revealed it to us in his written word. Yet we cannot apprehend a lot of his will because the Lord has chosen not to reveal it. Here theologians distinguish between God's "revealed will" and his "secret will." They ground this distinction in texts such as Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." In accordance with God's revealed will "a man plans his course," but in his secret will "the Lord determines his steps" (Prov. 16:9, NIV). What Scripture reveals can be known; and all Christ's disciples are called to obey his Word because it is what God prescribes. But

the indiscernibility of God's secret will can make it challenging to live by providence because we sometimes find ourselves in difficult situations that defy explanation or appear purposeless. Is the solution simply to resign ourselves to God's predetermined and established plan? Is faith in God's providence and sovereign will nothing more than confession of a predetermined plan? The book of Proverbs provides an answer.

### A Proverbial Plea for Providence

In Proverbs, the believer finds both general principles and specific counsel to walk wisely in "the fear of the LORD." Although we are separated from this book by chasms of time and culture, it continues to hold our interest through its terse sayings and ironic quips about money, marriage, parenting, lust, laziness, honesty, arrogance, and verbosity. It speaks to us in arresting ways, as when it notes the slow cruelty of a constant drip (see Prov.

27:15), the comic sadness of sloth's delusion (see Prov. 26:13), the surefire bloody nose of strife (see Prov. 30:33), or the seasickness of denied addiction (see Prov. 23:34–35). We can't walk away from this collection of sayings without having felt their sting, their humor, their irony, their cleverness, and, most of all, their poignant exposure of our daily foibles and culpable folly.

But just when we have stereotyped Proverbs as a collection of sayings that equips the believer with self-confidence and understanding for walking according to God's revealed will, Proverbs 3:5–6 surprises us with its admonition, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." This is not what many of us would expect from this particular book. It sounds contrary to what we take to be the book's tenor and purpose to build up our understanding so that we might direct our own paths wisely.

### **God, In Whom We Trust**

**P**roverbs 3:5–6 contrasts the trust that we must place in God with the trust that we must never place in ourselves, even if our understanding is grounded upon divinely inspired proverbs. These two verses remind us that we must commit ourselves and our ways wholly to God and that we may securely rely upon God's promise to preserve and govern us in all of our ways. They don't direct us merely to trust in God's purposes but to rest upon God himself. Our comfort is not primarily found in the idea of a predetermined path but in our trust in a loving Lord. We are called to trust in the One who is trustworthy and who carries out his purposes in a most holy, wise, and powerful way. This makes all the difference when I have just lost my job, or when your best friend has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, or when our church is going through an ugly controversy. How truly comforting it is in such circumstances to turn for aid to an infinitely powerful, resourceful, and compassionate God, instead of bracing ourselves with the idea that God has a wonderful plan for our lives! We can look to him with childlike faith, resting in his well-proven, steadfast, and faithful love.

We must not lean upon ourselves or our own understanding. The key contrast here is between us and the Lord, between our understanding and his. Some things are trustworthy, like the Lord. Some things are not, like our own understanding. Placing this proverb in the context of the entire book underlines the point that, in spite of all the wisdom and godliness that we may gain from Proverbs, yet if we lean upon our own wisdom—no matter how well-formed it may be—and do not fear the Lord and trust in him, then we have missed the book's point. As it says, "Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool" (Prov. 28:26). God's secret will is beyond our comprehension. We cannot spy out God's wonderful plan for our lives. So seeking to establish our plans in the strength of our sanctified wits is to trust in what is creaturely, darkened, and often unreliable. Simply to think is not to put "confidence in the flesh," but to put confidence in our own thinking is surely of the flesh.

### **Acknowledging God**

**P**roverbs 3:5–6 calls us to trust entirely in God's care, with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Our commitment must be total and exclusive. The commandment to have no other gods before him means that giving God *most* of our heart is not the same as giving him *all* of it. Such faith demands that we give ourselves completely to what he desires by obeying his commands. But, here again, we must not think of our obedience as separate from God and his providen-

tial care. We trust ourselves both to what God wants and to what he is doing. We have bet our life on God's revealed truth and on his person. Such a comprehensive commitment—"in all your ways"—means that we must rely upon God for every step of our pilgrimage. We must submit to God all of our beliefs, decisions, choices, motives, intentions, and plans, whether they are major or minor, present or future. And we must do this during those pleasant days when the path is level, fair, comfortable, easy, and leads to "green pasture," as well as when it proves to be unpleasant, hedged in with thorns, cross-carrying, and traverses the valley of the shadow of death.

One way that we exercise this trust in God's providence is by *acknowledging him* in all our ways. In a sense, Scripture is here encouraging us to "practice the presence of God." But there is more in view. To acknowledge God means not merely to be conscious of him and his constant care over us but also to consult him. Wise people consult others for counsel and advice (see Prov. 15:22). Just as Israel was to follow the Lord's guidance when traveling in the wilderness and to seek the Lord's will before going to war, so we are to acknowledge him in life's seasons of pleasure and of adversity alike. If we are not to lean upon our own wisdom, then we must seek God's.

We acknowledge God on bended knee and with open book. We take our difficulties, worries, decisions, plans, and endeavors to him in prayer. We may even set aside certain seasons for fasting because we are especially keen to acknowledge him and his will. Fasting does not make our decisions more sanctified or infallible; it simply emphasizes that we are not relying on our own strength but on his. Of course, searching, studying, pondering, and memorizing the Scriptures teaches us how to acknowledge and recognize God's will, power, wisdom, and goodness in practical ways. By implication, neglecting prayer or God's Word read or preached involves living as if God is not there or as if he is silent. Not to seek God's face, comfort, peace, wisdom, and truth involves living as if there is nothing to acknowledge but our own understanding. Consider Abraham, who would not pitch his tent without building an altar. We, too, must not sojourn without acknowledging the Lord.

### **Acknowledging God's Good Providence**

**T**he heart of the doctrine of providence is that God is the one who preserves and governs all of his creatures and creation. But the comfort of God's special providence is that he is looking after us, his Christian children, in even

more distinctive and particular ways. He not only knows our individual lives and needs, but he is directing our unique paths—he will make our ways straight. This “straight” has a moral sense. A bad person is *crooked*. John the Baptist prepared “the way of the Lord” by making “his paths straight” (Mark 1:3). The Lord makes our paths the right ones and the best ones. And so we pray that he will not lead us into temptation and that he will steer us clear of crooked ways that lead to destruction.

The paths of Christians will not always be into green pastures but they are always the best way to glory because God is in control. When David describes God’s special providence over his life in Psalm 23, he begins not by referring to God as his strength or his rock or his fortress or his deliverer or his refuge or his shield or his stronghold or his horn of salvation. Instead, he refers to him as his Shepherd. He derives comfort chiefly from the fact that God is watching over him in a way similar to the way a good shepherd leads, protects, cares for, and watches over his sheep. Our individual paths have indeed been ordained by God, but we walk these preordained paths confident in the person who empowers us to travel them by his Spirit and grace, especially when they become arduous. God is just; and his will for us is right. He is all-wise; and his will in our lives is reasonable. He is faithful; and what he allows in our life is endurable (see 1 Cor. 10:13). He is abundantly good; and what he sets before us is best.

In this sense, Proverbs 3:5–6 is the Old Testament equivalent of Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Paul did not write this as a promise to be claimed by those who are passively fatalistic in character but for those who actively love God. For instance, Joseph’s pathway led through a cistern, the bonds of slavery, and a dungeon. It was far from pleasant and surely at many times inscrutable to Joseph, who may have wondered what the living God was doing. But when the sun came out, he refused to be bitter about God’s will for his life, and he confessed to his brothers that, despite their intentions, God meant it all for good (see Gen. 50:20; 45:8). Like Israel in the desert, our paths through life’s wildernesses may not always be the shortest, but they are always sanctified and sanctifying. They may not be pleasant, but they are perfect for God’s purposes. As Sinclair Ferguson says, ours is a “path to glory, through tribulations.” Even as we direct all of our heart, soul, mind, strength, and ways to him according to his revealed will, God has directed all of our paths straight to himself according to his

secret will. We may not know *it*, but we know *him* and can trust him for it.

### Further Up and Further In

No matter what our circumstance may be, we need to hear again the call of Proverbs 3:5–6 to lean not on ourselves but to trust in the Lord. If we are walking the wrong path—the wide and well-traveled one that leads to destruction—then we must realize that we must lean upon Jesus Christ who alone is the way. If we have wandered from the narrow and less-traveled path because we have begun to lean on our own insight, wisdom, strength, and limited understanding, then we need to hear once again that God is to be acknowledged in everything. Or if we are discouraged and weary because lately we have seen nothing but desert and dark valleys, then we need to remember that God will, in his own perfect time, make our paths straight. We need to be encouraged that the Lord will do what he has promised and will guide us every step along the path that he has ordained.

The Lord has proven his faithfulness to his people as he has shepherded them. When Israel came to the Red Sea and was cornered by Pharaoh’s army, God led them through what seemed an impossible obstacle. Israel could not have discerned his secret will in advance, but they could trust him for it. When the children of Israel traveled through the wilderness, God fed them with the bread of heaven and brought water gushing from the rock. He faithfully led them by cloud and fire. They did not know where he would lead, but they could trust in Israel’s Shepherd. He was committed to bring them into the Promised Land, and he made good on that promise.

So also the Good Shepherd leads, protects, feeds, and strengthens us, his present flock, by his Word and his Spirit. The Lord promised his disciples that the Spirit of Truth would guide them into all truth (see John 16:13), and Scripture promises that we will be led by the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 8:14). The way our Shepherd directs us is through his Spirit working by and with the written Word of God in our hearts and minds. Thus we know the voice of our Good Shepherd and we are able to follow his lead. Thus God’s Spirit reminds us to trust in the Lord’s promises and good providence until our life finishes its appointed course and we are led into our heavenly inheritance. Whether the Lord leads us “beside quiet waters” or whether the waters of the sea “roar and foam,” we must not fear any evil, for he is with us, in our midst, and we shall finally dwell in the Lord’s house forever.

We ought to be encouraged that there is a plan, but

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not one ruled by fate. Our Triune God has ordained our steps, but more importantly, he is more than able and willing to watch over us so that we will not fall away. Our Captain, God the Son, has gone before us in his death and resurrection to secure our safe passage on this journey into the celestial Promised Land, where he will lead us to those heavenly "springs of living water" (Rev. 7:17). Our Comforter, God the Spirit, testifies that God will make our present difficult paths straight because we are his children and no one can snatch us out of his guiding hand (see John 10:28). Our God and Father loves us and has foreordained our paths. They will not always appear to us now as parts of a wonderful plan, but they are indeed parts of an exquisitely good and perfect plan. Our responsibility is not merely to trust God about this plan, but to trust in God himself, the living God who has gone to such great measures to bring us to himself. ■

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In this article, Dr. Troxel consulted the following sources: G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 141–160; Christopher Dawson, from "The Christian View of History," in *The Dynamics of World History*, ed., John J. Mulloy (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956); Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), pp. 223–241; Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993); and Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Discovering God's Will* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), pp. 23–24.

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