

Preaching: Rhys Lamont
Date Preached: 26/01/25
Text/Topic: Proverbs 16:9
Series: Select Proverbs

The following is an AI generated sermon audio transcript and may contain errors. Please do not republish or quote any part of this sermon without the authors permission.

Transcript Proverbs 16.9 God's Providence of Man

One of the things I enjoy about meeting people from foreign countries and really different backgrounds is trying to perceive and understand their worldview. Recently, Caitlin and I went to dinner with Paul and Therese Gray, and four young Israeli tourists in their 20s happened to be there that night as well. It was fascinating just to talk to them and listen to how their different life experiences and culture shaped the way they see the world. Of course, the same would be true for our lives in the way that they perceive our worldview.

We all have a worldview, you see, and it's made up of our core beliefs, principles, and facts we believe to be true, through which we perceive and interact with the world around us. The Christian is one who ought to have an obviously biblically informed worldview. The way that we understand the Bible will help us perceive the world rightly as God would have it. We are all shaped and molded by our environment and the values of those around us at critical points in our lives, such as parents to their children.

But as those being renewed by the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of those who know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, the scripture and our identity in Christ ought to be the locus and the heartbeat of our worldview. It goes without saying that by which all other things must be tested and weighed. In the Bible, only can we learn meaningfully about God and his ways, which ought to inform the way that we in turn see the world.

This morning, I want to help you with this task of worldview formation from Proverbs 16:9 in a message I have entitled "God's Providence of Man." Many of you have a supplement in front of you. I want to address, therefore, the doctrine of God's providence. This subject matter we want to look at is perhaps one of the most misunderstood, even abused, biblical doctrines in the church today. Countless pastors and preachers avoid teaching it. Some will slander it. For those who do faithfully teach it, many Christians simply close their hearts to its truth because of how difficult it is to grasp, among other reasons.

Yet any preacher and Bible teacher worth his salt ought to know that it is his duty to dispose of the whole counsel of God in his word, not merely that which will appease the ears of his listeners. Because the doctrine of God's providence over all things is so rife throughout the Bible, found on every page, really, it would be unfaithful to remain silent concerning it. I do believe wholeheartedly, which is why I'm eager to teach on this topic in the last of our look at the Proverbs, because I believe that there are a few biblical doctrines that, when understood and meditated upon, can be of such a blessing and a comfort to the Christian life.

The doctrine of God's providence of the world and all that is in it, correctly understood, as I hope you will see this morning, will forever change how you see the world, history, the church, and even your own life.

So what's the main point we need to know about the providence of God? I'll use the words of the 14th-century theologian, Thomas à Kempis, which reflects the heart of this proverb. He says this: "Man proposes, but God disposes." What does this mean? Well, that man proposes refers to the ordinary life processes that each and every one of us is engaged with. We make plans, don't we? We exercise choices. We intend to do one thing or another. But simultaneously, while man is proposing, God says he disposes. This means that all outcomes, all endpoints arrived at every moment of every day from the creation of the world are ultimately of God.

While man is proposing, God is disposing. When all is said and done, when God looks over the span and scope of human history, there is a perfect tapestry, a perfect outworking of his plan, his decree of that which would come to pass according to his secret council and known only to God. God's providence refers to God's

all-surpassing sovereignty over all things at all times and all places without exception. And of man especially, Solomon writes here, "The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps."

I have three headings this morning. First, we want to wrestle with this difficult truth under the paradox of providence. We then want to cement the doctrine and consider some biblical proofs under the proof of providence. Finally, I want you to see the power and beauty of this doctrine for the Christian life in the promise of providence.

So let's move first of all into the paradox of providence. As a simple definition, a paradox is a form of expression that seems to be either self-contradictory or absurd, but which at another level expresses fundamental truth. When we come to consider the providence of God over all events which occur in the world, we come to what is perhaps one of the great biblical conundrums, which is paradoxical in nature. Another such example of a paradox would be the doctrine of the Trinity. For we ask the question, how could God be one in being but three in persons? To us, it appears as a paradox, you see.

So follow me here. There are certain things in the Bible which bring us to the end of our ability to reason, the end of our ability to truly explain, the end of our ability to truly rationalize. While we can't make perfect sense of such things, we must accept them by virtue of the scripture's plain teaching. It is this way concerning the providence of God. There is a tension that we must accept. We see this very tension in our text, don't we? Look again at the two parts of verse nine: "The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps."

Do you see the paradox? In the first part, there is the mind of man planning his way. Applying this part to your life, you're getting up, going to work, checking the sheep, milking the cows, planting crops, taking your children to school, ringing family members, getting supplies for dinner with friends. Man has life; man has choices. His choices are his own. The mind of man plans his way, Solomon says. However, we must continue. This isn't all that happens in God's world. Look at the second half: "But the Lord directs his steps."

The same person, you and I, living life, making choices, is also having their steps ultimately directed by the Lord. Our lives, when all is said and done, occur in accordance with that which God ordains. For it is the Lord who directs or establishes our steps. So do you see the paradox? The tension. Man is living his life with his will, with his faculty, with his choices, with his options, with his decisions. But Solomon tells us that through this free and uncoerced activity of man, he is mysteriously fulfilling God's plans and purposes as the one who directs his steps.

You see the tension. I feel it, and you'll feel it too. And what are we to do about this tension? I plead with you, absolutely nothing. Accept it. Don't try to solve this tension. There are two truths that we must allow to simultaneously exist: the free will and moral responsibility of man, and second, the absolute sovereignty of God, by whose decree before the foundation of the world so determined all things that would ever come to pass in all places at all times. That is the paradox of the providence of God.

We hold those two things true simultaneously, not knowing how they work together, but accepting them at face value as the scripture would have us. These two truths must be held together with the corresponding tension we feel because scripture affirms both. Listen to Proverbs 20:24: "Man's steps are ordained by the Lord. How then can man understand his way?" You see, Solomon understands the paradox too. How can man understand his way when his steps are ordained by the Lord? Yet when some theologians rise above their station, devising philosophies seeking to solve this tension to fit human reason, they only distort scripture's plain teaching.

They call this paradox contradictory, unfeasible, impossible. They reject the notion that man can be truly morally responsible for his actions all while God's sovereign purposes work out through those free human actions. Hence erroneous philosophies such as Pelagianism, Arminianism, and Molinism arise. But friends, we only want to go as far as the scripture leads us and accept that there are things belonging to God that we cannot perceive. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God." So that is the paradox of providence.

Let's consider now the proof of providence. You will need further proof at this point to convince you further. First then, a few more Proverbs. Look at verse one of the same chapter, Proverbs 16:1. Observe again the tension in the two parts here: "The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord." You see the same two-fold reality of man's will and God's sovereignty.

Look at verse 33 of the same chapter, Proverbs 16:33. God's providence is so complete over his world that we read, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." Man will cast his dice; he casts the lot into the lap, yet its ultimate outcome belongs to the Lord, he says. There's the tension again. You see, providence governs even the most insignificant details in the world.

Now go over to Proverbs 19:21. "Many plans are in a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord will stand." You see, through human activity in life, still it is ultimately God's counsel, his plan, which will work itself out, as the text reads.

What part does providence play concerning kings and people occupying positions of power? Well, let's go to Proverbs 21:1. "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he wishes."

So do you see the tension in all of these examples? And are you willing to accept it? Look now, again, there's that verse that I just want to mention briefly: Proverbs 21:31, "The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but victory belongs to the Lord." It's the same again. The rider prepares his horse; he sorts the stirrups and he sorts the saddle. He makes preparations to take his horse into battle. All of these things are normal human life. He's making decisions about this and that, but when all is said and done, he has really no ultimate control over the final outcome, for the victory, if he'll have it, the defeat, if he'll have it, is from the Lord, Solomon says.

Friends, this sovereignty is etched across and throughout all the scripture. It tells us who God is and of his great power, his irresistible will, that he alone is he who counsels. Man is placed in God's world, and it is not we with the power to place God into our world as the flesh seeks to do. The psalmist says in Psalm 37:23, "The steps of a man are established by the Lord, and he delights in his way." Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 10:23, "I know, O Lord, that a man's way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps." You see the tension there again.

But let me show you how this works out in a couple of narratives to really help you understand. We'll start with one from the Old Testament, then two linked passages from the New Testament. We'll begin in Genesis chapter 45. As you know, Joseph's brothers betrayed him. They sold him as a slave to Egypt, faked his death to deceive their father Jacob, and moved on with their lives. But that wasn't the end, was it? In the text, we're told three times that actually working through, follow me here, working through the sinful actions of Joseph's brothers was God's purposes.

In Genesis 45:5-8, Joseph says to his brothers, "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life." There's one. "For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting." Here's number two: "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth and to keep you alive by a great deliverance." "Now therefore", here's number three: "It was not you who sent me here, but God, and he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt."

Now, do you see the doctrine of providence working out here? Do you see the tension again? Who sent Joseph to Egypt? Was it Joseph's brothers or was it God? Well, ultimately, the text tells us it was God, though the responsibility for the sin, of course, falls to the brothers. There's the mystery; there's the tension. God's providence working through the sinful free actions of people. We can't understand how that works, but we see it there, don't we? He providentially ordains and uses sin for his own glory and praise, such as the sin of Joseph's brothers. Truly their sin, truly they are responsible for it, and yet Joseph knows that that which occurred ultimately was the outworking of God's will.

Now for another example, we turn to Luke's gospel, chapter 22. This is concerning the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we'll make reference to Acts 2:23 as well. Here in Luke 22:20, we read these words: "And in the same way he took the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But behold, the hand of the one betraying me is with mine on the table. For indeed the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed.'"

Now look very closely at the last phrase here. Here again we see the tension of human responsibility and divine sovereignty. For Jesus says, "But woe to that man by whom he is betrayed." You see, Judas, who betrayed Jesus, is morally culpable for his betrayal of Jesus. Truly in the eternal courts of God, Judas is truly morally culpable for his sin in betraying the Lord Jesus Christ to death. So there's the human responsibility. And yet we also see the all-encompassing providence of God working out his perfect will and plan, determined.

For see how Jesus says that the Son of Man is going as it has been determined. Determined by who? By God in eternity past when the lamb was slain since the foundations of the world, the scripture says. It has been determined that Christ would go to the cross, and yet the one who betrayed him to that death will be held morally responsible for his own sin. And there's the tension that we cannot understand. Again we see it. God's predetermined plan came to pass through the free, though sinful actions of Judas for which he is held responsible! There's the tension, I can't reconcile those two truths for you but I don't have to because the scripture affirms them both.

On the death of Christ, listen to John and Peter in Acts 2:23. They say "this man", that's Jesus, "delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God. You nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put him to death."

Who crucified Jesus? Who crucified Jesus? First of all it says he was delivered over by what? The predetermined plan, foreknowledge of God. God ordained in his decree that the Christ would be crucified and yet they can still say "you nailed him to a cross!". Godless men and will be held responsible for such. And

again we have the tension of human responsibility and culpability and the sovereignty of God. You see, it was God's decree coming into effect when Jesus died, and yet Peter can still say, "You nailed him to a cross by the hands of godless men."

Listen to these words of Isaiah 46:10: "Of God he says, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all my good pleasure.'" God is sovereign.

Now, let's move to our final heading: the promises of providence. Now that I have perhaps opened your minds, I hope, and perhaps explained these things that you've maybe never heard before, and perhaps now you will need to wrestle with these further, I invite you to come and quiz me if you'd like to talk about it further. We consider now the promises of providence.

I don't want this to be an intellectual exercise; it's not my purpose here. This doctrine is not simply for the academic classroom because it is a difficult doctrine, but rather this is for the believer. That's why it's included in scripture.

So what does this mean for the Christian? How do we live for God and Christ out of the doctrine of providence? What does the doctrine of God's providence mean concerning the affairs of your life? Well, first, it means that in the ultimate sense, there are no accidents in your life—only learning opportunities. There is nothing left to chance. There are no true mistakes. There is no random. There is no such thing as luck, and we must rid ourselves of such pagan and perverse thinking as this that is common in the churches today.

We must erase this language from our vocabulary of luck, chance, and random. We must reject that which makes God out to be some kind of sleepy grandfather who created the world and left it to be, as if looking to find out what will take place. In Ephesians 1, listen to this language. Paul unashamedly says to the Christian, "We have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to his purpose." Now listen to this: "Who works all things after the counsel of his will." Do you hear that? "Who works all things after the counsel of his will," Ephesians 1:11.

The meaning of the "all" here in this context is absolutely unmistakable. It's an "all" as in a universal "all." All things are being and have been worked out after the counsel of God's will. Not man's counsel, not Trump's counsel, not Putin's counsel, but God's counsel, his will. God did not look down the corridors of time to learn from man, his creatures, how his decree would work out, as some suppose. Rather, God decreed after his own counsel and his own wisdom. It is unmistakable in the scripture.

As Job reflected on this tension in Job 23:14, he says this: "For he, that is God, performs what is appointed for me, and many such decrees are with him." Friends, if you think this makes humanity into robots, as is the accusation against this biblical teaching, you have gotten lost in trying to solve that tension I placed before you. You're trying to solve the paradox that we cannot solve; our minds cannot bear it. We must accept human agency, human will, but we must also accept divine sovereignty, both together.

If you think that this doctrine makes God the author of sin, then again, you are trying to reconcile a tension of human responsibility and divine sovereignty that you must simply accept. But what this doctrine means for your life is that you can rest knowing that what is ordained for you in Christ comes out of the abundance of his loving purposes towards you. That he will work all things together for good if you are in Christ. And does that not fill you with joy knowing that God is at the helm of your life? Is that not reason to worship and to praise his name, that he knows the end from the beginning and he has plans for you?

For your good, for your sanctification, for your righteousness, for your salvation. We must learn to trust his providence in our lives and confess that, as another said, reflecting on these things, not the smallest of dust particles is suspended in a ray of light apart from the sustaining power of God, whose power in his creation brings to pass that which he has decreed in eternity past.

So consider these: when you are struck with illness, when you are immobilized perhaps, perhaps you are becoming weary in your old age, won't you hold fast to your God and say to yourself, "Nothing, nothing can come upon me that my God whom I love, who has given me Christ, has not already ordained for me. And he means it for my good. And I will trust him and render myself to him."

Or perhaps some of you are grieving that your children have or are showing no interest in Christ. Every family deals with this to some degree. Your children are showing no interest in Christ though they've heard the gospel over and over again. Christian, will you trust in God's providence? Will you continue to simply be faithful, to walk in that which he has commanded you, to trust him, to continue to pray for your children, to preach the gospel, and yet trusting in his providence?

Or maybe when a family member or a friend suddenly dies, will you then rest in the knowledge of God's providence who has ordained all our days? Why else would the psalmist say in Psalm 31:15, "My times are in your hand"? The test of whether we really know and trust this doctrine of God's providence comes when we are

under pressure, when we are in hot water. How much can you bear and still look to God and rest in the knowledge that it's the Lord who holds you and ordains those things for you and means them for your good?

The same goes for Woodlands as a church. Some of you might be worried about the future, but what does God's providence this morning teach us? Well, it teaches us that God has purposed even in eternity past things concerning Woodlands for the praise of his glory and his grace out of his counsel. If he wishes to close us, he'll close us, and he'll move believers elsewhere. If he wishes to fill us to the brim, he'll do it. Only trust him; trust the God of providence.

And so I end on these application points drawn from Willemus A. Brackel, the Dutch theologian. He says this: First, be diligent in your life to renounce your own will. Stop living in idolatry and thinking that you are the arbiter and chief agent of your own destiny. You are but a vapor, passing in the breeze, not knowing what tomorrow holds for you.

Secondly, Brackel says to often stimulate love for the sovereignty of God. Now, if you don't want to do that, do you know what the alternative is? To be thinking about your own sovereignty. We must meditate, you see, on the God-ness of God, the God-ness of God, to worship him and his sovereignty.

And thirdly and finally, we must believe unreservedly that all God has decreed concerning his elect, he has decreed to their benefit. You must rest wholly in your identity in Christ and the salvation that God has granted you by his grace, knowing that he means you good in him. It has not yet even entered the believer's mind the kind of riches of the glory that he has prepared for you in the life to come when the fullness of his blessings shall be truly known.

Let's pray.