

Men's Bible Study Discussion Questions and Answers

The Providence of God

1. What is the root word (and meaning) of “providence”?

The root word for *providence* is “provide.”

Providence is defined as: “1. Care or preparation in advance; foresight. 2. Prudent management; economy. 3. The care, guardianship, and control exercised by a deity; divine direction: “*Some sought the key to history in the working of divine direction*” (William Ebenstein); 4. Providence. God.” American Heritage Dictionary; Second College Edition; [Note: William Ebenstein was one of America's most prolific political scientists, and a scholar who had gained a worldwide reputation.]

Generally, when we speak of *providence* it is in reference to God *providing*, especially in advance, through His *foresight* (omniscience) and *watch-care*. Perhaps a bit more specifically, we also recognize God's *providence* in the *controlling, managing, or guiding* of human affairs and events to arrive at His desired outcome(s), as in the raising up of the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar to punish Judah, cf. Dan.1:1-2; 2:20-21,37-38.

2. Where and how is the actual word used in the Bible?

The word “*providence*” only occurs in one passage throughout the Scriptures; and only then in the AS, NASB and KJV. In Acts 24:2-3, the lawyer Tertullus seeks to flatter Felix, the Roman governor at one of Paul's trials, by attributing *peace* for the Jewish nation to his *providential reforms*. I seriously doubt Tertullus believed or meant what he said. Felix was corrupt and brutal; the “*reforms*” he *provided* brought *peace* only through their brutality. He was so bad that even Nero had enough and removed him from office, cf. Acts 24:27.

The Greek word translated as “*providence*” (in Acts 24:2) by the KJV, AS, and NASB is *pronoia* (**pron**-oy-ah); and is defined as: “1 forethought, providential care. 2 to make provision for a thing.”¹ Obviously, Tertullus is using this word relative to Felix rather than God. Since this is the only occurrence of the word in the inspired text, our usage of it relative to God should be with caution, and certainly within the confines of the basic meaning of the word: *providing in advance* through *foresight*.

3. Explain the difference between God acting *providentially* and *miraculously*.

When God intervenes *providentially*, He does so through and according to natural law. But when He acts *miraculously*, He does so *supernaturally* and therefore contrary to natural law. Perhaps a couple of examples will help.

Consider two pregnancies that God caused to happen:

- 1Sam.1:1-2,9-11,17-20; Hannah was barren, but prayed to the Lord for a son. Her petition was granted, but it was through *natural* means of

¹ Strong, J. (1995). [Enhanced Strong's Lexicon](#). Woodside Bible Fellowship.

her having relations with Elkanah, her husband, vv.19-20. Thus, God *provided* her with the son for whom she prayed, but did so through the *natural* means.

- Luke 1:26-37; Mary was a *virgin* and yet was told that she would bear a son. When she questioned how this could be since she was a *virgin*, she was told that “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God,*” v.35.

God acted in both cases to *cause* these women to become pregnant. In Hannah’s case, He did so *providentially* through the *natural* means of procreation by her husband. But in Mary’s case, God acted *miraculously* through *supernatural* means by the Holy Spirit (Matt.1:24-25 confirms that Joseph “*kept her a virgin until she gave birth...*”).

It is admitted that this definition of *providence* (God intervening in human lives and events through *natural* rather than *supernatural* means) is perhaps an over-simplification. Consider His *providing* of a physical savior for the house of Jacob through Joseph. God utilized both *natural* and *supernatural* means to get Joseph to Egypt and have him elevated to a place of prominence so that he could save his family (and the Egyptians) from starvation. If we take this kind of broad definition of God’s *providence* as pertaining to *preparation in advance* through *foresight*, then God acting in *natural* and *supernatural* means must both be included in it. This is, at least in part, the difficulty of clearly defining and understanding *providence* as pertaining to God.

4. What are some examples of God’s *providence* in the Bible that are not necessarily identified as such?

First of all, any examples of God’s *providence* in the Bible are not specifically identified as such for a very simple reason: the word is only found once, and it is used by an uninspired man making a (probably *false*) statement regarding another man. However, I do believe that there are (non-miraculous) examples of it that can be cited:

- Acts 14:14-17, where God “*gave rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.*” Surely this is an example of God *providing through foresight*, but isn’t it accomplished through *natural* rather than *supernatural* means?
- Jas.5:17-18, where *Elijah* is said to have “*prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for a year and six months. And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit.*” Certainly God acted in response to Elijah’s prayer, but did He not do so *naturally* rather than *miraculously*?

5. Generally, how do we know when God has acted *providentially*?

Though (as stated in the answer to the previous question) the Scriptures do not use the word *providence* relative to any action of God, they do, as per the

examples given previously as well as many others that could be named, tell us that God has *acted according to foresight to provide for mankind* in various instances. So basically, we know that God has acted *providentially* when He indicates that He has done so in the Text.

6. Can we know, specifically, that God has acted providently in our lives? How, or why not?

The only way of which I am aware that we can specifically know that God has acted providentially in our lives is:

- When the Scriptures clearly indicate that He has (by affirming that He will act in certain ways and circumstances), cf. Matt.6:25-34; or,
- When He answers our prayers through *natural* rather than *miraculous* means, cf. Jas.5:13-20. 1Cor.13:8-10 and Jas.1:25 (along with 2Tim.3:16-17) reveal that the age of *miracles* has ended with the completion of His revelation, *i.e.* the *New Testament*. Please do not misunderstand: I do believe the Scriptures teach that God still intervenes in our lives *providentially*; I do not believe God acts in our lives today *miraculously* (both as defined above in answer to question #3).

Because *providence* necessarily involves God intervening through *natural*, and therefore usually subtle means, it necessarily follows that in the absence of divine revelation, such actions can be difficult (if not impossible) to positively identify. Both Est.4:14 and Phile.15-16 highlight this difficulty.

7. Considering your answers to the previous questions, what is the relationship between *providence* and *prayer*?

We should pray for God to act *providentially* in our lives, otherwise, what is the purpose of beseeching Him for such in the first place, Luke 18:1-8; 1Pet.3:12; Jas.5:16; 1Thess.5:17; *et al.*

However, we should not pray for God to act in ways that He has revealed He will no longer act, such as *miraculously*.