

We are going to talk about a characteristic of God that few discuss, fewer believe and some find offensive. Yet when rightly understood from a Biblical framework, it can bring us great comfort and hope for our every day lives. Many, even Christians, may or may not believe God has this characteristic. We know that because of the way people talk and live. We know it because of what people write on birthday or anniversary cards. We hear about it as they try to explain history or their lives or how the world works.

We see this unbelief with statements like “Good luck.” “Knock on wood.” “Crossing my fingers.” Or “it was fate.” Or “I make my own luck.” Or, “he only got that by chance.” So what are we talking about?

God’s Sovereignty and God’s providence. **God’s sovereignty is His ultimate reign and lordship over everything in the universe** – all of creation; all of history; all people; all governments; all rulers; all natural forces. **God’s providence is His preserving and directing actions over everything in the universe** – Over history, over nations; over rulers; over disease and illness; over life and death; over human actions and sins and over our all of our lives. The word “providence” doesn’t show up in the Bible. Theologian Millard Erickson writes this: “Providence derives from the Latin *providere*, which literally means to foresee. But more than merely knowing about the future is involved. The word also carries the meaning (connotation) of acting prudently or making preparation for the future.”<sup>1</sup> So God’s providence involves God’s action in the world and in our lives with an eye to the future.

We may not talk about this much. Maybe because if we grow up in the church our tradition didn’t talk about it or teach it. We also live in a world where many don’t believe that God exists, so they must find other reasons to explain the world and its events. Explanations include fate, luck, randomness, or their own efforts. Others who may believe in God don’t believe He is sovereign or that He’s directly involved in our world. Or they don’t believe He matters or does much.

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<sup>1</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 387.

Then there are some who do believe in God and that He's active today. But they find God's Sovereignty and Providence offensive or troublesome. Some don't like the idea that God reigns over everything including them. This goes against our radical individualism. We like the power or empowerment we feel when we rule our lives. We feel free and released when we get to do whatever we want to do. God's sovereign rule gets in the way of that. We want Him to rule the realm of the afterlife and take care of our loved ones. We're okay if God rules when our loved ones die. We're okay if God comforts us in difficult times or answers a prayer for healing or gets us a new job or finds our soul mate. We're ok with God helping us and healing us but not reigning over us.

Others might not like the idea of God's sovereignty or providential actions in their lives because they don't like their lives. We think that if God is sovereign and providentially acting, He's not doing a very good job. Our lives are hard, or not going well, or we're not feeling great or our marriage is struggling or we face confusion regarding our kids or life purpose or direction.

Or we might resist God's sovereignty and providential actions because we don't like the direction, He seems to be leading us. That direction would require us to change, to step out of our comfort zone, grow, mature, give up some habit or some piece of our lives that we cherish. We don't want to do that.

But what if God's supreme rule and providential actions were ultimately for our good? What if His directives moved forward one of His great purposes to bring hope to the world? He wants us to be part of that and experience deep soul satisfaction through it. What if the waiting time we're going through right now was purposefully designed by God; to help us see something in our lives that needs to change before we take the next step?

What do you believe about God's Sovereignty – His ultimate reign and authority over everything in the universe including your life? What do you believe about His providence – His preserving and directing actions over everything in the universe?

Why am I bringing this up the week before Christmas? I think because the next part of the Christmas story brings it up. Through God's sovereign action, He will accomplish a great miracle that fulfills His Word and blesses millions including many here today. So we're going to look for God's

providence in a very familiar Christmas text. Then we're going to do a quick survey of Scripture to see more of His providence. Then will look at some ways this can affect our lives today.

Our text is Luke 2:1-7. Page 723.

### **Luke 2:1-7 (ESV)**

**2 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration when<sup>1</sup> Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> And all went to be registered, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup> And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, <sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.**

This is one of the most quoted and familiar Christmas texts. It starts with this decree from the Roman Emperor of the time, Caesar Augustus. He showed great skill and interest in the administration of the empire. He wanted to ensure that it had sufficient funds. So to register or "take a census," was for the purpose of taxation. They wanted people to declare their assets so they could then tax more efficiently.

Then Luke tells us that this was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Luke tells us this because of another famous and violently opposed registration under Quirinius in the year 6. This is referred to in Acts 5:37. That's not the census Luke talks about. Yet this presents a problem because there is no other recorded census under Quirinius reign as governor. And that unpopular registration took place after the death of Herod. Yet we know Herod was still alive when Jesus was born. He eventually had all 2-year-old males slaughtered in Bethlehem to try to get Jesus.

I think the strongest explanation for this is a translation decision. Some of your Bibles might have a footnote to Luke 2:2 that says "This was the registration *before* Quirinius was governor in Syria. The verse can be translated "when Quirinius was governor" or "before Quirinius was governor. Both are possible. A registration before Quirinius meant it could happen about the year 4 A.D. before Herod's death.

News spreads about this required registration. Verse 3 tells us each went to be registered in their hometown. It seems like this required them to go their ancestral hometown or perhaps any place they had land claims. Either way, Joseph needs to go to Bethlehem. He and Mary live in Nazareth High in Galilee way up in the north. Bethlehem is in Judea in the south about 85 miles or 137 km away.

Notice the reference to David. Luke first identifies Bethlehem as the city of David. David's father had land right around Bethlehem. That's where David got his shepherding experience. Though Jerusalem came to be known as the city of David, Bethlehem was the family home of David's father. Joseph descended from David which Luke tells us at the end of verse 4.

Joseph could head down to Bethlehem, register, and then come back to Mary in Nazareth. There seems to be no reason for her to make that journey especially in her condition. But in verse 5, Luke tells us Joseph brought Mary along. He alludes to the scandal of it all. She was betrothed to Joseph AND with child. In a Jewish context, betrothal and pregnancy did not go together. If you were betrothed and pregnant by someone else, you were soon un-betrothed. But we saw last week, Joseph took Mary as his wife.

So why does he bring her along? There are two possibilities. One is that the authorities started to claim a tax on females 12 and older about that time. So even if you didn't have property, you got taxed. That's more money for the government. But Joseph may also have brought her because of the gossip vine. Maybe he didn't want to leave her alone to endure the scorn and shaming of the community while he was gone. They make their way to Bethlehem and you know the rest of the story which we will focus on next weekend.

So, where's the providence of God? Where's the sovereignty of God? Well, how did God communicate with Mary and Joseph up to this point? In Luke, we've seen God send an angelic messenger first to Zechariah and then to Mary. Last week in Matthew we saw God send an angel to appear to Joseph in a dream. As the Matthew account continues, there will be more dreams to guide Joseph on next steps. So did Luke just forget to include another dream here or another visit from an angelic messenger who told Joseph that they needed to go to Bethlehem? It seems unlikely. The gospel

writers learned of all the other dreams. It doesn't seem like God sent an angel to Joseph or Mary telling them to go down to Bethlehem.

What's the big deal about Bethlehem anyway? Why couldn't they just have had Jesus in Nazareth? Well, there was this prophecy by the Old Testament prophet called Micah. The Lord says in Micah 5:2, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days." Many recognized that Scripture as a prophecy of the Messiah. Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem.

Joseph and Mary are in Nazareth. They've got to get to Bethlehem. But they have no reason to go until news comes that the Roman Emperor has issued a decree that all the world should be registered. Was that chance? Was that some random thing that happened to work out? Or did God turn the heart of the emperor to make this decree? It would lead Joseph and Mary to make the journey to Bethlehem prior to the birth of the baby. We don't know how far along Mary was in her pregnancy. The popular portrayal is that she was eight and a half months pregnant. But we don't know. Luke simply says in verse 6, "while they were there, the time came for her to give birth." But the news of the decree came early enough for Joseph and Mary to travel so that they would be there in time.

So either that is an amazing coincidence. Or we have the Sovereign God over the universe using the emperor's decree. Augustus thinks this is all about Rome and him. But there was something much bigger going on than the taxation of the empire. The king of kings was about to be born in Bethlehem. Not in the palaces of Jerusalem. No. Because of the census and the packed-out city of Bethlehem, they couldn't find a room in the inn. They couldn't find space in a house. So Jesus is born maybe in a cave or a barn. He's laid in an animal feeding trough that we call a manger.

That demonstrates how different this king would be compared to the ones up the road in Jerusalem. Jesus was born into humble circumstances and visited by humble people. Only those with humble hearts who saw their need for a savior would eventually come to Him.

**God uses a Roman Emperor's decree to ensure Jesus is born in the right place and circumstances.** Now if God can do that, do you think He might be able to manage things in your life?

Do you think He has the power, wisdom and knowledge to providentially preserve you and providentially direct you to His greater purposes?

Theologian Millard Erickson writes this: “Providence is central to the conduct of the Christian life. It means we are able to live with the assurance that God is present and active in our lives. We are in his care and can therefore face the future confidently, knowing that things are not happening merely by chance. We can pray, knowing that God hears and acts upon our prayers. We can face danger, knowing that he is not unaware and uninvolved.”<sup>2</sup>

Scripture teaches us about the extent of God’s providence. God controls nature. Psalm 135:5-7 – “For I know the Lord is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and in the deeps. He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses. God controls human history and the destiny of nations. Acts 17:26 – “And God made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.”

God is sovereign over the personal circumstances of individuals like Hannah in the Old Testament. Listen to what she says after years without conceiving a child. Then the Lord blesses her with Samuel. So she prays in 1 Samuel 2:6-7 – “The Lord kills and the Lord brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich: he brings low and he exalts.” She recognized providential actions of the Lord in the world and in her life.

David rests in God’s sovereignty Psalm 31:14-15. “But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in your hand; Paul instructs the Corinthians to be humble since everything we have is from God. in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 4:6-7 he writes, “I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be

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<sup>2</sup> Erickson,m 387-388.

puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"

God is sovereign even over the roll of a dice. Nothing is pure chance. Proverbs 16:33 states, "The lot (or dice) is cast in the lap, but the decision is wholly from the Lord." The Lord is sovereign over the free actions of humans. Psalm 33:15 says "The Lord fashions the hearts of all the inhabitants of the earth." Or Proverbs 16:1 – "The plans of the mind belong to man but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.

God is sovereign over the sinful actions of people. Joseph famously says to his brothers in Genesis 50:20 – "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." We see God's sovereignty over sinful actions in the crucifixion of Jesus. Peter says this on the Day of Pentecost. Acts 2:23 – This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

These are just a few examples of God's sovereignty and providential purposes throughout the Bible. **God sovereignly rules to ensure His purposes are accomplished in the world and in our lives.** When we begin to grasp this and accept it and believe it, we can live differently than thinking the world is random.

How? First, we must accept the reality of God's sovereignty and providence. That might take some time and exploration. This includes admitting that we can't completely grasp how it all works since God has infinitely more knowledge than we. Second, Recognize that God is ultimately at work for our good. 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."

Third we must learn to live in the light of God's providence. We can live with greater confidence because of God's preserving God's work in our lives. God's preserving work in our lives. Jesus said in Matthew 6:26, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" As God provides for the birds, he

will certainly provide for us. So we need to spend some time outside in the winter watching these birds who continue to live despite the weather. They are a living testimony to God's provision.

God preserves us by loving us. Nothing can separate us from his love. In Romans 8:35, Paul asks "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Then he lists about 17 major threats that we might conclude will separate us to separate us from God's love. Yet Paul concludes none of them can separate us from "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." God's providence releases us from trying to hold the world together. Remember Colossians 1:17 about Jesus? "He is before all things and in him all things hold together." Nothing in creation is self-sufficient. It all depends on Christ. So we don't have to live these self-sufficient lives thinking we've got to come up with everything on our own.

God also promises to preserve us through trials. He does not watch us suffer from a distance with disinterested boredom. He actively works to sustain us. Psalm 23:4 - "Even though I walk to the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me." preserving providence can give us great confidence as our refuge and fortress according to Psalm 91:2 - "I will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.'"

If God is constantly at His work, preserving the world and preserving our lives. So we don't have to worry about all those forces beyond our control. We can rest in the reality that God rules over it all to accomplish His good purposes.

God also cares intimately and deeply about our lives we don't have to deal with the hard times alone. He sees all we do and think. He knows the difficult people and situations that have come into our lives. He actively works to preserve us through trials, grow us through struggles, carry us through sorrow and encourage us when fearful.

So even as we wait for answers, or direction, or release, or for an open door, God is for us. God sees us. God is at work on our behalf.

Sometimes we need a reminder of how much He has already given us and provided to rekindle that belief in His loving providential care. So did we thank God today for hot water in our showers been in an era where such experience is possible; food in our fridges; indoor plumbing in the winter; absence



of war from the land; the love of family, friends or church family; the ever open arms of the Father to hear our prayers and respond to our requests?

This does not mean that we just get to sit back and do nothing. God's providence and sovereignty works through human actions. Joseph and Mary had to actually get up and make the journey to Bethlehem. But we can act knowing we're not at the mercy of chance or fate. Nor does the whole world depend on our sufficiency and resources. We have our little part to do. And we can entrust the Lord with the rest.

We've barely scratched the surface on this topic. There's still questions about divine sovereignty and human responsibility, how evil fits in, difficult medical conditions and suffering. Maybe this will spark a desire to explore this more deeply to discover more of God's character.

But I hope you see a little more clearly that there is comfort and hope when we know God reign and God's acts. So I'd like to invite you today to bring before the Lord that which concerns or troubles you. Maybe it's a worry; confusion; question; pain or a hurting heart.

### **Psalm 147 (ESV)**

#### **147 Praise the LORD!**

**For it is good to sing praises to our God;**

**for it is pleasant,<sup>[a]</sup> and a song of praise is fitting.**

**<sup>2</sup> The LORD builds up Jerusalem;**

**he gathers the outcasts of Israel.**

**<sup>3</sup> He heals the brokenhearted**

**and binds up their wounds.**

**<sup>4</sup> He determines the number of the stars;**

**he gives to all of them their names.**

**<sup>5</sup> Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;**

**his understanding is beyond measure.**

**<sup>6</sup> The LORD lifts up the humble;<sup>[b]</sup>**

**he casts the wicked to the ground.**

**<sup>7</sup> Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;**

**make melody to our God on the lyre!**

**<sup>8</sup> He covers the heavens with clouds;**

**he prepares rain for the earth;**

**he makes grass grow on the hills.**

**<sup>9</sup> He gives to the beasts their food,**

**and to the young ravens that cry.**

**<sup>10</sup> His delight is not in the strength of the horse,**

nor his pleasure in the legs of a man,  
<sup>11</sup> but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,  
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

<sup>12</sup> Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem!  
Praise your God, O Zion!

<sup>13</sup> For he strengthens the bars of your gates;  
he blesses your children within you.

<sup>14</sup> He makes peace in your borders;  
he fills you with the finest of the wheat.

<sup>15</sup> He sends out his command to the earth;  
his word runs swiftly.

<sup>16</sup> He gives snow like wool;  
he scatters frost like ashes.

<sup>17</sup> He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;  
who can stand before his cold?

<sup>18</sup> He sends out his word, and melts them;  
he makes his wind blow and the waters flow.

<sup>19</sup> He declares his word to Jacob,  
his statutes and rules<sup>[a]</sup> to Israel.

<sup>20</sup> He has not dealt thus with any other nation;  
they do not know his rules.<sup>[a]</sup>

Praise the LORD!

Let us pray.