

What is divine providence?

Divine providence is the governance of God by which He, with wisdom and love, cares for and directs all things in the universe. The doctrine of divine providence asserts that God is in complete control of all things. He is sovereign over the universe as a whole ([Psalm 103:19](#)), the physical world ([Matthew 5:45](#)), the affairs of nations ([Psalm 66:7](#)), human destiny ([Galatians 1:15](#)), human successes and failures ([Luke 1:52](#)), and the protection of His people ([Psalm 4:8](#)). This doctrine stands in direct opposition to the idea that the universe is governed by chance or fate.

Through divine providence God accomplishes His will. To ensure that His purposes are fulfilled, God governs the affairs of men and works through the natural order of things. The laws of nature are nothing more than God's work in the universe. The laws of nature have no inherent power; rather, they are the principles that God set in place to govern how things normally work. They are only "laws" because God decreed them.

How does divine providence relate to human volition? We know that humans have a free will, but we also know that God is sovereign. How those two truths relate to each other is hard for us to understand, but we see examples of both truths in Scripture. Saul of Tarsus was willfully persecuting the church, but, all the while, he was "kick[ing] against the goads" of God's providence ([Acts 26:14](#)).

God hates sin and will judge sinners. God is not the author of sin, He does not tempt anyone to sin ([James 1:13](#)), and He does not condone sin. At the same time, God obviously *allows* a certain measure of sin. He must have a reason for allowing it, temporarily, even though He hates it.

An example of divine providence in Scripture is found in the story of Joseph. God allowed Joseph's brothers to kidnap Joseph, sell him as a slave, and then lie to their father for years about his fate. This was wicked, and God was displeased. Yet, at the same time, all of their sin worked toward a greater good: Joseph ended up in Egypt, where he was made the prime minister. Joseph used his position to sustain the people of a broad region during a seven-year famine—including his own family. If Joseph had not been in Egypt before the famine began, millions of people, including the Israelites, would have died. How did God get Joseph to Egypt? He providentially allowed his brothers the freedom to sin. God's divine providence is directly acknowledged in [Genesis 50:15–21](#).

Another clear case of divine providence overriding sin is the story of Judas Iscariot. God allowed Judas to lie, deceive, cheat, steal, and finally betray the Lord Jesus into the hands of His enemies. All of this was a great wickedness, and God was displeased. Yet, at the same time, all of Judas's plotting and scheming led to a greater good: the salvation of mankind. Jesus had to die at the hands of the Romans in order to become the sacrifice for sin. If Jesus had not been crucified, we would still be in our sins. How did God get Christ to the cross? God providentially allowed Judas the freedom to perform a series of wicked acts. Jesus plainly states this in [Luke 22:22](#): "The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed. But woe to that man who betrays him!"

Note that Jesus teaches both the sovereignty of God ("the Son of Man will go as it has been decreed") and the responsibility of man ("woe to that man who betrays!"). There is a balance.

Divine providence is taught in [Romans 8:28](#): "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." "All things" means "all things." God is never out of control. Satan can do his worst, yet even the evil that is tearing the world apart is working toward a greater, final purpose. We can't see it yet. But we know that God allows things for a reason and that His plan is good. It must be frustrating for Satan. No matter what he does, he finds that his plans are thwarted and something good happens in the end.

The doctrine of divine providence can be summarized this way: "God in eternity past, in the counsel of His own will, ordained everything that will happen; yet in no sense is God the author of sin; nor is human responsibility removed." The primary means by which God accomplishes His will is through secondary causes (e.g., laws of nature and human choice). In other words, God usually works indirectly to accomplish His will.

God also sometimes works directly to accomplish His will. These works are what we call miracles. A miracle is God's circumventing, for a short period of time, the natural order of things to accomplish His will. The blazing light that fell on Saul on the road to Damascus is an example of God's direct intervention ([Acts 9:3](#)). The frustrating of Paul's plans to go to Bythnia is an example of God's indirect guiding ([Acts 16:7](#)). Both are examples of divine providence at work.

There are some who say that the concept of God directly or indirectly orchestrating all things destroys any possibility of free will. If God is in complete control, how can we be truly free in the decisions we make? In other words, for free will to be meaningful, there must be some things that lie outside of God's sovereign control—e.g., the contingency of human choice. Let us assume for the sake of argument that this is true. What then? If God is not in complete control of all contingencies, then how could He guarantee our salvation? Paul says in [Philippians 1:6](#) that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." If God is not in control of all things, then this promise, and all other divine promises, is in doubt. If the future does not belong completely to God, we do not have complete security that our salvation will be made complete.

Furthermore, if God is not in control of all things, then He is not sovereign, and if He is not sovereign, then He is not God. So, the price of maintaining contingencies outside of God's control results in a belief that God is not really God. And if our free will can trump divine providence, then who ultimately is God? We are. That conclusion is unacceptable to anyone with a biblical worldview. Divine providence does not destroy our freedom. Rather, divine providence takes our freedom into account and, in the infinite wisdom of God, sets a course to fulfill God's will.

From GotQuestions.org