

## "PROVIDENCE"

(Acts 23:12-35)

(T.H.L Parker)

The word *providence* is one of those that do not occur in the Bible but nevertheless truly represent biblical doctrine. There is no Hebrew equivalent for "providence," and the Greek word translated thus, *pronoia*, is used only of human foresight (Acts 24:2; Rom. 13:14; for the verb *pronoiein*, see Rom. 12:17; 2 Cor. 8:21; 1 Tim. 5:8). Rather, the Bible uses ad hoc descriptions like "he gives food to every creature" (Ps. 136:25), or "he makes springs pour water into the ravines" (Ps. 104:10), expressing in concrete situations God's mighty acts toward his children.

We must resist the temptation to think about providence generally and independently of Christ. It would be possible to draw on certain psalms and the Sermon on the Mount, for example, for a doctrine of God's relationship to creation that had nothing to do with Jesus Christ. But since in Christ this relationship is established, attempting to understand it apart from him would be a misinterpretation from the start. In Jesus Christ, God has set up the relationship between himself and his creatures, promising to carry through his purpose to its triumphal conclusion. The primal relationship with Adam, renewed with Noah (Gen. 8:21-22), is no less *in Christ* than the covenant with Abraham or Moses. Christ the mediator, who is the incarnate Word, establishes this relationship, and in him God becomes the God of people and they become his people. (The mediator must also be regarded as setting up the relationship between God and creatures other than people.) As their God, he will take up the responsibility for their earthly existence.

Providence may then be viewed from three aspects.

1. The creation is the stage on which God enacts dealings with humankind. Providence is God's gracious outworking of his purpose in Christ. Doctrines of predestination aside, from the beginning God ordered the course of events toward Jesus Christ. From the biblical viewpoint, world history and personal life stories possess significance only in light of the incarnation. The squalid story of lust in Judah's dealings with Tamar (Gen. 38) takes its place in the Messiah's genealogy (Matt. 1:3). Caesar Augustus was on the throne in Rome for the sake of the unknown baby in its manger.

2. According to Acts 14:17; 17:22-30; Romans 1:18-23, God's providence served also the purpose of bearing witness among the heathens. God's fatherly care was a sign pointing toward himself. Romans 1:20 makes clear that the purpose of this witness was simply to render humans inexcusable for not knowing God. At this point also, therefore, providence is included in the doctrine of reconciliation.

3. The God who gives life further preserves humans while they are on earth. God is not a God of the soul alone, but of the body also. In Matthew 6:25-34 disciples are reminded (by their Creator himself) of their creaturely relationship to God, and they are freed from all anxiety about their earthly future. The other creatures (as exemplified by the birds and wildflowers) have been set in a definite relationship to God that he faithfully maintains. Will God bestow less care on humans, to whom he has given a higher place in creation (Ps. 8:6-8)? Behind this doctrine lies God's almighty and loving freedom.

In sum, the doctrine of providence tells us that the world and our lives are ruled not by chance or fate but by God, who lays bare his purposes of providence in the incarnation of his Son.

