

WHAT IS PROVIDENCE?

by Derek W. H. Thomas

TO THE GROUP LEADER: This resource is designed to help you lead others to better understand one of the “Basics of the Faith” booklets published by P&R. The numbers in brackets indicate the page number in the booklet. Below each question is an answer based on what the author presents, or advice on how to discuss the question. You have the freedom to adapt the questions to best fit your group.

A good teaching technique is to distribute the questions to the group and have them write down how they would answer BEFORE reading the booklet. After reading, members can refine their answers based on their reading. As a group, members can discuss their views to affirm or modify what they wrote.

1. If God knows **everything** that is going to happen throughout time, and there is no way to change any of it, how are we any more than puppets? (5-7)
There is nothing like jumping into the middle of a hornet’s nest! Let this question be bounced around for a short time, but don’t let it get out of hand. The rest of the session will help them begin to understand the mind of God on this, as far as that is possible.
2. If you are not familiar with the book of Ruth, read these four short chapters. This book can be read from two views: God’s big picture view from which He sees His long term plan for bringing about the birth of Jesus, and His short term view from which He leads Ruth throughout her life from one of obscurity to becoming the grandmother of King David, and an ancestor of Jesus.
Now read the story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50. Can you find the two views in Joseph’s life? (7-14)
A good place to start is with the catechism question #11. Keep this before them throughout the lesson. Ask them what they think was in Joseph’s mind when he was accused of rape and sat in prison for two years. Then ask them what Joseph must have been thinking when he said: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” As Joseph went through these difficult times, he could only see things from his limited view of life. But from God’s broader view, there was a bigger picture yet to be revealed to and through Joseph. Help the group see how both views show us God’s providence.
3. Can you show the two views in the story of Job? How did Job see his circumstances? How did God see them? (14-17)
Job’s story might be more familiar to the group, but for any that are not, go over the first chapter and finish with what God does for this faithful man at the end of the book. Again, always keep before the group, God is in charge, and He can only do that which is right and that which is best.
4. **When** did God look ahead and see what would happen in the future? (17-22)
*He **never** did! What God knows, He has **always** known. God has never learned anything because He has always known everything. This is difficult for us to understand or explain. What follows from this is just as difficult, but it must be accepted because God is Who He says He is. God **did not** look ahead in time and see what you would do in response to your call to salvation, and on the basis of what you decided, He elected you. This would say He had to **learn** something about what you would do, and it also says your salvation was totally done by you and without Him. This is not what the Scripture teaches anywhere.*
5. Let’s rephrase question one this way: If God is sovereign (which He is) and knows everything (which He does), how does that affect the thought that you make free choices? (22-25)
*Any time you use the word “free” you **always** have to define its parameters. There is no such thing as absolute freedom for anyone, not even God. God is not free to sin, nor can He contradict Himself, etc. You are not free to be born of your own will, etc. Having said that, the next question is, “Did you make your own ‘free’ choice to accept Christ?” The answer is, you did and you didn’t. As far as you were aware you made a choice without coercion, but then you learn from Scripture you had no ability to make that choice unless*

the Holy Spirit first gave you a new heart. So, how can both of these truths exist? The Bible only gives us one answer – Deut.29.29. God tells us as much as we can understand about His sovereignty and we know we made a choice on what seemed to be our own. How those two seeming contradictions can both exist is resolvable only in the mind of God.

6. When things go wrong, so many times we hear people say, “Why, God?” Why do people blame God when things don’t go the way we want? (25-27)
Ask the group to remember, or better yet, memorize, this phrase: God is perfect, therefore everything He does is perfect.” Every time someone says, “Why, God?” they are accusing God of not doing something perfectly because “He let this happen.” And, if God doesn’t do everything perfectly, He, therefore, cannot be perfect. This puts us in an intolerable position, because we know He is perfect. This should then cause us to return to our basic premise realizing God is not to blame for what happened.
7. Why would God create man knowing he would sin? (28-29)
Here is another statement to memorize: “For God to do anything less than the very best He could do, for Him it would be sin.” We learn from the Bible that the very best is yet to come in the New Heaven and New Earth. But, for us to get there, we have to go through this period of sin first.
8. If God is sovereign and knows everything, why pray? (29-32)
God *is* sovereign and knows everything! But you and I also have the responsibility to make choices. When we evangelize, we know the person we are talking to is dead and incapable of responding to our message unless the Holy Spirit gives him the ability to respond. If he does respond, he made a “free” choice, but he was only able to do so based of the work already done by the Spirit. For this we should be thankful because this takes the pressure off of us to convert people.
9. Could God use the brutality of Alexander the Great as he conquered the world? Could God use to His glory the Roman armies who slaughtered countless numbers of people – even God’s people? (32-36)
He can, and He did! Read Gal.4:4. He used Alexander to give the world a common language, and the Romans to build roads all at the most perfect time in history so the Gospel could be shared and carried throughout the known world.

After going through these questions, read the text and fill in the answers in preparation for class, noting other questions you might have. [By the way, if you do have any other questions about what you read, write them down here so you remember them at class time.]

APPLICATION

Carefully read Romans 8:28, especially the last part. Now read 2 Timothy 3:12. We confess our purpose is to glorify and enjoy God, but in reality we want only the good that goes with that. God’s purpose is to glorify Himself by establishing His Kingdom. To do that may mean suffering for us. The application here is not a typical one. This one is asking if you are truly willing to suffer for the Name of Christ. Most evangelism doesn’t spell that out up front, but it should. So here you are, being asked this question because it will ultimately prove what your true relationship to Christ looks like. Are you willing to pay the price of being His disciple, no matter what the cost? What needs to change in your life for that to happen? Make a plan!

For Further Study

Inconspicuous Providence: The Gospel According to Esther, Bryan R. Gregory. P&R, 2014.
The Invisible Hand: Do All Things Really Work for Good?, R. C. Sproul. P&R, 2003.

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