A summary of the doctrine…

“DIVINE PROVIDENCE”
by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

The “big question” theologians have been debating about for centuries is this: “Do our choices matter?” or “Does God determine the events of our life?” Those who use the process of “deductive reasoning” in order to arrive at a logical answer, will conclude that it must be one or the other. But that is not what Scripture teaches. The Bible is full of paradoxical truths that sometimes leave us without a simplistic answer. Regarding the two propositions stated above – the Bible teaches us that “both” of them are true. Most believers embrace just one of these two propositions – either our decisions matter, which means the future is completely open (not determined)… or we tend to think that God has a plan, and because of that our choices are, essentially, insignificant. Contrary to deductive reasoning, however, the Bible teaches us that “both” propositions are true: On the one hand human beings are absolutely free to make choices – God does not coerce us, force us, or fool us; on the other hand, all human beings live completely under the “providence of God” – even down to the smallest coin flip; and that is where the rub comes for many. It should be noted that those theologians who believe in the sovereignty of God and divine election, essentially embrace the position espoused in this study.

Divine Providence is the means by which God governs all things in the universe. This doctrine asserts that God is in control of all things, and stands in direct opposition to the idea that the universe is governed by chance or fate. The purpose, or goal, of Divine Providence is to accomplish the will of God. To ensure that His purposes are fulfilled, God governs the affairs of men and works through the order of things. The Laws of Nature are nothing more than a depiction of God at work in the universe. The Laws of Nature have no inherent power (cf. Col 1:17), nor do they work independently of God; they are simply the rules and principles that God set in place to govern how things work.

The same goes for “human choice.” In a very real sense we are not free to choose or act apart from God’s will. Everything we do and everything we choose is in full accordance to God’s will – even our sinful choices (cf. Gen 50:20). The bottom line is that God controls our choices and actions (cf. Gen 45:5; Deut 8:18; Prv 21:1), yet He does so in such a way that does not violate our responsibility as free moral agents, nor does it negate the reality of our choice. The doctrine of Divine Providence can be succinctly summarized this way: “God in eternity past, in the counsel of His own will, ordained everything that would happen; yet in no sense is He 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, human choice) – in other words, God works indirectly through these secondary causes to accomplish His will. God also at times works directly to accomplish His will in ways we would describe as miraculous and supernatural.

Essentially, there seems to be “three competing views” regarding God’s sovereignty in the Christian community – I would identify them as the Deistic View… the Partial View… and the Full View. Following is a brief description of each of these views:

1. **The “Deistic View”** – In this view God is sovereign in that He has established the “parameters” for the created order, but does not intervene in any way. In a sense, He “wound up the clock,” so to speak, and is just letting things happen as they may – but He is no longer “involved.”
This particular view is completely contrary to what Scripture teaches, yet “some professing Christians” still believe this is the way God operates. This view sees God as quite distant.

2. **The “Partial View”** – In this view God only gets involved at the “highest level” – God has an overall plan for humanity, but only intervenes when it is necessary to get His plan accomplished. This view is much like that of a rocket traveling through space – when midcourse adjustments are necessary, “central control” makes the adjustments in order to reach its desired destination. Those who hold to this view allow for God’s involvement in a limited number of ways – they see God as only working through a select group of “major players;” i.e., Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, the Prophets, the Twelve, Paul, etc. Some in this group even allow for “divine election,” but they don’t see God as an “integral part” of all the events that go on in people’s lives and in the world at large. This view would maintain that God has some “special players” through which He works to accomplish His will, but the rest of us are pretty much responsible to work things out on our own – God has given us His Word and His Spirit to guide us, and it is up to us to do the best with the resources He has provided. Apparently, this view also allows for divine intervention at times, as the result of the faithful prayers of His followers. But this view does not see God as orchestrating the course of events in the lives of each of His children.

3. **The “Full View”** – In this view, all of God’s children are “major players,” not just those who are in the more prominent positions, and He is intimately involved in their lives to the “nth degree” – none of God’s children are “secondary players.” Therefore, the work of God in the lives of those individuals mentioned in Scripture can equally be applied to every believer’s life – as such, we can each identify with those individuals mentioned in Scripture and how God worked in their lives. Some of God’s children may play more prominent roles in the world, but God’s work is just as dynamic in those who have been assigned less prominent roles – furthermore, everyone’s role is critical, even at the minutest level, to the fulfilling of God’s overall plan. None of God’s children are relegated to “group status” – in Hinduism there are “distinct classes” of people, but not in Christianity – as His children, we all have an integral part to play in His overall plan (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-25), though we are “one talent” children, or “one hundred talent” children. God went to the cross for each of us individually, and He is intimately involved in each of our lives – down to the “nth degree” – regardless of the role He has ordained for us. The problem many Christians seem to have with this view is that it “seems” to relegate us to “robot status” – but that clearly is not the case. God’s plan neither “negates” man’s choices, nor do man’s choices “trump” God’s divine providence – both are taught in Scripture. This is just one of the many “paradoxes” found in Scripture.

There are a number of “paradoxes” in the Christian faith, and at times these may appear to be somewhat confusing to the casual reader. A paradox is a “seemingly contradictory statement” that nonetheless is true. Just because a statement appears to be a contradiction, does not mean it is false and cannot be reconciled. Following are some of the “major paradoxes” within the Christian faith –

- God is one in three persons… free will vs. predestination… Jesus is fully human and fully divine…
- God’s kingdom on earth is already here, yet it is not yet here… we live, yet we do not live; Christ lives in us (Gal 2:20)… when we are weak then we are strong (2 Cor 12:10)… we live to die (Mt 16:24-26; Rom 6:3-4)… we mourn to be happy (Mt 5:4)… we surrender to be victorious (Mt 19:16-22; Rom 12:1-2)… we become poor to become rich (Mt 5:3)… we become least to become the greatest (Mt 20:25-28)… we become blind in order to see (2 Cor 5:7)… we give to receive (Lk 6:38). Conversely, Scripture teaches
that “our choices” matter tremendously, yet nothing happens outside of the “decreed will of God” (everything that occurs, happens according to the predetermined plan of God). One of the most complex paradoxes seems to be this: it is not God’s will that we sin, nevertheless sin lies within the will and plan of God – that is not double-talk, that’s paradoxical truth. When you build a theology, you cannot build it on a select number of verses; you have to build it on the totality of Scripture, and that is not always easy. The problem with many theologians is that they construct a “smorgasbord theology;” that is, they simply pick and choose what fits their desired theological position.

The issue most believers struggle with is whether or not “sin” has a place in God’s economy. After all, how could a “perfectly holy God,” who admittedly “cannot look upon sin,” incorporate sin into His plan for the universe? That is a fair question, and one most students of Scripture have asked. Perhaps one of the keys to answering this issue is to understand that God did not “create sin” – that is, He is not its author – but that He did “create the potential for sin,” by not programming His creatures to choose only that which is good. Therefore, since He created His creatures with the capacity to “choose whether or not they would love and submit to Him,” He created the potential for sin.

According to Scripture, prior to the “seven days of Creation” described for us in Genesis, there was an “angelic order” already existing in the heavens. Prior to the Genesis account of creation, a “rebellion” broke out in heaven when the “most beautiful of all the angels” – Lucifer – decided he wanted to ascend to the throne of the Most High (cf. Is 14); ultimately, a third of all the angels of heaven expressed a desire to run their own lives and have their independence as well (cf. Rev 12:4; Jude 6). God obviously could have created beings where that would not have been possible, but He did not choose to do that. Also, since He knows the “end from the beginning,” because He is eternal, He knew full-well that a significant number of angels would rebel against Him. When the angels mounted their “coup,” He also could have “held court” right on the spot, and banished them to eternal damnation and annihilation in a majestic unforgettable display of power. Again, that is not what He chose to do. Instead, He chose to “put evil and all of its adherents on trial” before all creation, in such a way that the nature of sin would be revealed in its fullness, in contradistinction to the glory and majesty of God’s character and attributes. At the end of the trial, all creatures will humbly bow and swear allegiance to the God of creation, and confess that all glory and dominion and power and honor belong to Jesus Christ alone (cf. Phil 2:10-11; Rev 5:12-13; Is 45:22-23). God’s creation of man was the setting for the “trial of evil” (read the last chapter of this book). The Bible tells us that Lucifer and the angelic realm all witnessed “God’s laying the foundations of the earth” at creation (Job 38:7), and that “God made everything for His own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil” (Prv 16:4).

When God created the heavens and the earth and mankind, He placed him in the most idyllic setting possible – the “Garden of Eden.” It was absolute perfection in every way. And in the middle of that garden he placed the serpent “Satan” – think about that – knowing full-well that the Devil would entice man to sin. Scripture also tells us that in God’s eternal plan “Christ was slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8) – so from eternity past God had a “plan” in place to demonstrate His power and glory over sin and darkness. And in His plan God incorporated the “cross of Christ” as the centerpiece – this was the predetermined plan of God (cf. Acts 2:23). Furthermore, Scripture clearly states that God declared the “end from the beginning” (cf. Is 46:9-11; Rev 22:13) – as such, there are no surprises in God’s divine economy. Scripture also tells us, “all the days of our lives are numbered” – every one of them (Ps 139:16); and that “His sovereignty rules over all” (Ps 103:19). Following are the majestic words of God in Isaiah 55 –
My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts. . . . As the rain and the snow come down from heaven. . . to water the earth and make it sprout forth vegetation. . . so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.  (Is 55:8-11)

Paul writes, “When the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son” (Gal 4:4). Again, this was all according to the predetermined plan of God (cf. Jn 7:30). Paul writes in his letter to the church at Ephesus that “God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world… in love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace” (cf. Eph 1:4-6; cf. Jn 1:13). God’s plan of redemption was planned in eternity past before any of the created order of Genesis existed.

About one third of all Scripture was “prophetic” when it was written; that is, it was a foretelling of what was going to happen. There are approximately 2,500 prophecies in the Bible – of that, some 2,000 (or eighty percent) have already been fulfilled, and the other 500 (or twenty percent) are still yet future. Prophecy discloses the predetermined plan of God. By the way, prophecy has nothing to do with God simply looking into the future, and seeing what will happen, and then foretelling what He sees, as if He wasn’t the Author of such things – that is not prophecy, that is fortune telling. In short, God’s Word is God’s divine plan for human history – much of it was written “after” the events happened – that part is recorded history; and much of it is prophetic in nature in that it foretells the events “prior” to their happening.

Note the following passages from Proverbs chapter 16 – “The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from God” (Prv 16:1) – the essence of this verse is “man proposes, but God disposes.” “The mind of man plans His way, but the Lord directs his steps” (Prv 16:9) – this verse describes the folly of a man who thinks his ways are in his own hand, when in fact he is not able to move one foot unless God gives force. “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord” (Prv 16:33) – it is God who directs and orders the results; all things are determined in the counsel of God, and are directed by God’s divine providence. Thus, man plans – yet God directs. Scripture is very clear on both sides of the issue – Man’s plans are his own… they totally belong to him… God doesn’t force him to do anything… if man does something stupid or evil, he will be held accountable… human beings are 100% responsible for all of their choices.

Conversely, everything that happens in history is all “fixed” by God. Nothing happens in our world or our lives that is outside the providence of God. Though, on the one hand, our plans and choices matter tremendously; on the other hand, the outcome (what happens) is 100% determined by the perfect providence, plan and foreknowledge of God. Notice that Proverbs is “not saying” it is a 50/50 proposition – that we are partly responsible and that God is partly responsible. Proverbs says it is a 100/100 proposition – man plans, but God directs – which of course is why it is utterly impossible to understand. With that being said, we do not have to understand it… but we do have to trust it.

If we lean too much on the side of “fatalism” – that nothing we do matters, you will become totally passive and horribly cynical… you will have very little hope and very little motivation… and you will
think you are just a pawn in some cruel, fatalistic game. On the other hand, if we lean too much on the side of “self-determinism” – that we determine the course of our own destiny… that our destiny is 100% tied to our will, the choices we make, and the prayers we pray, we will find ourselves exhausted, bewildered and disillusioned at the end of life. The “biblical view,” paradoxical though it may be – is utterly practical. On the one hand, our choices matter greatly… on the other hand, we can relax and rest in the loving, caring arms of a sovereign God. So when you are looking for God’s will and guidance in the journey of life, and think you have really messed things up too badly, stop torturing yourself by listening to the condemning words of Satan… because “even at that moment” you are standing right in the middle of God’s will! God is doing something in your life! He is not surprised in the least at what is transpiring; He has been working out His will in your life all along! (cf. Phil 2:12-13).

**Even our “sin” has a purpose in God’s divine plan.** Think about this for a moment: the “worst sin” ever committed – the crucifixion of Christ – purchased your salvation and mine, and brought the greatest glory possible to our Savior in heaven – that is an astounding thought. Therefore to think that some “low-level sin we commit” cannot bring God glory is ludicrous – if God was glorified on the cross, how much easier is it for Him to be glorified through our little mistakes? Furthermore, every time you and I sin as His children, “we turn toward our heavenly Father, and tell Him we fully agree with Him regarding our sin (that’s confession), we denounce our sinful behavior, and claim the blood of the cross of His Son. The response in heaven? All the angelic host “rejoice” when we do so! So every time we sin, and confess that sin, we put another “stake” in the corpse of evil! The fact that God somehow includes “sin” in His plan seems to be the issue that many believers struggle with – how can God include something that is so diabolical in His plan? Perhaps a “broader definition” of sin would be more helpful – a “narrow definition” relegates sin to “overtly evil acts.” The Bible, however, identifies sin as “anything that is not of faith” (Rom 14:23). Therefore, try and see the “broader definition” in God’s plan – God has room in His plan for that which is “not of faith.” So recognize that God has a reason and a purpose for your sin – or lack of faith – and by His sovereign grace He will miraculously bring “good” out of it.

**Here is the rationale** – God includes sin in His plan, because “our sin” causes us to turn to Christ (cf. 2 Cor 7:9). . . our lack of trust ultimately causes us to trust God more… our sin actually causes us to see how utterly sinful we really are – how else would we ever learn that? Our sin helps us see how great and wonderful and loving and forgiving God really is… though we know God loves us through His Word, we know even more that He loves us because He keeps on forgiving us no matter how many times we mess up. God lets us sin to teach us His ways… to reveal to us our hearts… and to reveal to us His lovingkindness. Obviously, there is “no room for boasting in any of us” (cf. Eph 2:9), so none of us can say we don’t need these lessons. I can’t imagine anyone “hating sin” more than I do, yet I continue to wallow in it, like a pig in mud – God obviously is teaching me something, not only about me, but about Himself. If I had the privilege of “pushing a divine button” that would free me from ever sinning again, I’d push it in a nano-second! In truth, I can’t imagine there are too many other believers on this planet who would be more quick to push that button! Though “sin” is a big deal in the sight of God – none of us can deny that – the fact is “God’s grace” is a far bigger issue! How would we know His love and His grace if it were not for our sin? So the ultimate thing in my life is not “how much I sin” – as big an issue as that is – but what God is doing in my life to “conform me to the image of His Son” – that is vastly more important and more significant. As the psalmist David said, “this is too wonderful for me, I cannot attain to it!” (cf. Ps 139:6; Rom 11:33; Job 42:3).
Remember, as God’s children “we are being put to death all day long!” (Rom 8:36) – it is all in God’s plan. Every day we are to die to self and crucify the flesh. We may be fooled into thinking we have “semi-arrived” when we compare our behaviors with other people – but that is not the model we are supposed to compare ourselves with – the true model is “Jesus,” and when we compare ourselves to that model, each of us falls horribly short – sometimes we do not even think we are in the same ballpark. As believers, the good news is we don’t have to live with the fear and regret that we somehow “don’t measure up,” or that we now have to “settle for second best” (or third, tenth or fiftieth!) for our lives because of our poor choices, or that we must have “missed the boat” at some point along the way – Satan is the one who plays this cruel game with us. The truth is, God is the God of endless chances, limitless forgiveness, and is infinitely committed to our future glory as one of His children, in spite of our constant failings. He understands our frame – we are but sinful dust! – and He knows exactly what He is doing! Look at the life of King David – he messed up a number of times in his life – do you think God made him settle for second, third, or tenth best? Not at all! By the way, even the Lord Jesus was born through the line of Bathsheba! Once again, God shows us how He takes us just as we are and makes “something beautiful” out of our lives – even though we frequently get in the way and screw things up! – and it is all according to His eternal plan!

When we find ourselves in the midst of a “mess,” even of our own making, we need to stop entertaining Satan’s condemnation and focus on the incredible truth – “right at this moment we are standing in the center of God’s will!” Don’t worry about how you got there! That is irrelevant. Just praise God that He has you right in the middle of where He wants you to be at that moment in time! By the way, God is the one who is sanctifying us and making us like Christ – contrary to popular opinion, it is not us! (cf. Jn 17:17; Rom 8:29; Eph 1:4-5; 1 Th 5:23). In a sense, this accomplishment can be compared to the greatest of all race horses – Secretariat – he did not achieve all that glory by his own efforts – first of all, God made him with all the grit he possessed, and his handlers and trainers and riders worked him round the clock to make him who he ended up becoming, in spite of many of the stubborn negatives that were in him! That is kind of reminiscent of how God works with us – He made us with all of the qualities we possess, and He is ever at work in our lives orchestrating every little thing to ultimately make us into a “gold medal winner!” So on the one hand, it has nothing to do with us! Yet, on the other hand, we have the privilege of cooperating with Him in the process and enjoying the ride (cf. Phil 2:12-13). The apostle Paul said, “though we be faithless (as we often are!), He remains faithful” (cf. 2 Tim 2:13) – God is faithful to doing exactly what He determined to do in our lives before the foundation of the world! That is an incredible “fact!” He is totally committed to our eternal well-being, and tells us in no uncertain terms that one day He will totally transform us into the “exact likeness of His Son,” that we might enjoy a glorious heritage in His eternal kingdom (cf. Phil 1:6; 2:12-13; Rm 8:29-30; 1 Th 5:24; Ps 138:8). Do you really think we played a significant role in all that? Not at all. It is all grace. Consider for a second a little “teaching moment” Jesus had with His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before He went to the cross –

Jesus said to His disciples, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” Then He prayed to His Father saying, “Father, if Thou art willing remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done.” Being in agony, Jesus prayed very fervently, and His sweat became like drops of blood. When He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping from sorrow, and said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Lk 22:39-46). Here Jesus was simply revealing to His disciples how weak and frail and fleshly they were – but God had only begun His work in them. None of
this was a surprise to Him – it was simply a “teaching moment” in the lives of His disciples; God was making them into the people He wanted them to be.

Here is another big question theologians ask – Was Jesus’ death on the cross “God’s will” or “Man’s will”? In other words, “Why did Jesus die?” Because of us? or because Jesus’ death was at the heart of God’s plan to save the world? According to the Bible it was because of man’s will; it was our sins, and that of Judas, the religious leaders, and Pilate – we are the ones responsible (cf. Lk 22:6; 24:20; Mk 15:15; Acts 2:23). We are the ones who yelled, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” At the same time, that is not the whole story. Reality is always far more complicated. In His letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “God did not withhold His Own Son, but handed Him over for all of us” (cf. Rom 8:32; Jn 10:11; 1 Jn 3:16). So who “handed Jesus over” to die? God did. Therefore Paul writes in Galatians, “The life I now live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and handed Himself over for me” (Gal 2:20). So here we have it – God handed Jesus over and Jesus handed Himself over. Yet the night before, Jesus was in absolute agony in the Garden because the Father did not grant Him His request. Jesus poured out His heart to His Father and pleaded for guidance and direction – and here is the reality – Jesus was standing right in the center of God’s will all the time. The same goes for you and me – even though we sin – we are standing right in the center of God’s will – because our “sin” (unbelief, lack of trust – cf. Rom 14:23) is being used by God to help transform us into the image of Christ.

Note God’s words in Jeremiah 29:11 – “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” It is very true that our choices matter – and we do have to live with them; we do reap what we sow… at the same time, each one of us is standing right in the middle of a perfect plan! a phenomenal plan! and get this – a plan we cannot screw up! God’s invisible hand guides every step of our lives! This is one of the great truths of Scripture we need to trust, even though it is something we cannot fully understand. So, become a person of prayer, where you align your will with God’s will and enjoy the journey… knowing –

YOU DID NOT MISS THE BOAT!

History has been rightly described by theologians as God’s Story – “HIS STORY.” Here is a quick chronological look at God’s plan in human history – The Serpent in the Garden of Eden was a part of God’s plan (or he wouldn’t have been there!)… Adam’s fall was not outside the plan of God (Christ was slain before the foundation of the world)… Noah didn’t just happen to be the “only believer” left on planet earth – by the way, what if Noah hadn’t believed in God? What would God have done then? But that was not His plan! Abraham was not appointed to the work He was called to do because He was a “good guy” (He was God’s choice). God said, “Isaac I loved, but Esau I hated” (the word “hated” here carries with it the idea of “not having relationship with” – God’s relationship with Isaac was according to the predetermined plan of God – cf. Rom 9:13 – God had no relationship with Esau). The Children of Israel were not “chosen” because they were a godly people – they were not! they were simply God’s choice! – He picked a motley crew through which to accomplish His purposes). Joseph’s enslavement in Egypt was God’s choice (Gen 50:20)… Moses being placed in a basket was not an ingenious scheme planned by a brilliant woman… Pharaoh was a part of God’s plan… the Mosaic Law was a part of God’s plan… David was God’s choice… Bathsheba was all a part of His plan (thank God for Psalm 51 – how much comfort has that psalm provided for us as God’s children?).… the Prophets were God’s appointed representatives – they foretold the coming of the Messiah… Job was God’s chosen servant, and all that he was subjected to was all according to God’s plan – and many of us have prayed, “God, don’t make me another Job!” The Old Testament Canon
was a part of God’s plan… *John the Baptist* was God’s servant from the womb (Lk 1:5-17)… the *Twelve Disciples* were God’s chosen servants (Jn 15:16)… *Judas* was a part of God’s plan (look at how Jesus loved him! how could He possibly love him?)… the *Apostle Paul* was God’s chosen servant… the “*Cross*” was God’s plan (“crucifixion” was prophesied long before it was even invented!)… the *New Testament Canon* was a part of God’s plan… the *age of the Gentiles* was all in God’s plan… the formation of the *Church* was God’s plan… the *grafting back in of the Jews* is also a part of God’s plan… the *end of human ministry* was written before the foundation of the world… *divine judgment* will happen according to God’s predetermined plan… and the existence of the *new heaven and the new earth* are all a part of God’s eternal plan!

**Just because “sin” has a place in God’s divine economy and plan, does not mean that He is the “cause” of it.** The Cross was God’s plan, but Satan and his followers (Judas, etc.) were the cause— as such, they will be judged accordingly. Think of it in these terms – if God never wanted “sin” to exist, it would never have come into existence. Period. Never. Therefore *sin* was not an accident. God is God, and all that exists is all a part of His eternal plan — but that does not mean that God is the “cause” of everything. Man sins, and he is fully culpable and responsible for his actions—even though it is all within the predetermined plan of God – that is the difficult paradox. Obviously, such paradoxical mysteries cannot be fully reconciled in the minds of men. *Satan* was a part of God’s plan… *Nebuchadnezzar* was a part of God’s plan… *Antiochus Epiphanes* was a part of God’s plan… *Judas* was a part of God’s plan… *Hitler* was a part of God’s plan… the *Anti-Christ* is also (though still future) a part of God’s plan. We have all heard the metaphor of a “*beautiful tapestry*” – from the front, it is absolutely magnificent… but from the back, it is an “*indescribable mess!*” Our problem as humans is, we see everything from the back or bottom side – but from God’s eternal perspective, what He is accomplishing is an “*incredible masterpiece!*” By the way, I fully understand how difficult it is for a believer to think that “he” is actually included in God’s masterpiece — for me it only serves to confirm that God indeed is sovereign. Someday, we will see it all from God’s perspective.

**Charles Spurgeon’s favorite Puritan writer, Richard Sibbes,** makes the following statements in his book *The Soul’s Conflict:* “The most casual and disordered things are subject to divine providence. The most horrible sin the sun ever beheld – the crucifixion of the Lord of life – was guided by a hand of providence to the greatest good. Although man hath a freedom in working, yet even these are guided by an over-ruling power” (Prv 21:1). He goes on to say, “We must know that God’s manner of guiding things is without prejudice – He guides them according to the instincts He hath put into them. God is not only the *cause* of things and actions, but the cause likewise of the *cessation* of them. God is the *cause* of why things are not, and why things are. Nothing is so high that it is above His providence… nothing is so bad that God cannot draw good out of it… and nothing is so wisely plotted that God cannot disappoint it. It cannot but bring strong security to the soul, to know that in all variety of changes and intercourse in good and bad events, our God hath such a disposing hand. Whatever befalls us serves His eternal purpose. All sufferings, blessings, ordinances, graces and gifts are ruled by God” (Sibbes’ book on “Conflict” – pp.144-151).

**It is important for believers to know that they are “under a providence” that is above their own.** Flesh and blood is prone to expostulate with God, and question His dealings, as we see in Gideon, Asaph, Habakkuk, and others – “If the Lord be with us, why then has all this befallen us?” After some struggling between the flesh and the spirit, the conclusion will be, no matter how things go, “God is God” (Ps 73:1). God’s ways often seem to us full of contradictions, because His course is to bring things to pass by “contrary means.” God doth all things according to the counsel of His own will.
His will is a wise will, a sovereign will. The only way to have “our will” is bring it to God’s will—we must align our will with God’s will; and that we do through prayer. If we could delight in Him, we should have our heart’s desire (Ps 37:4). Thus David yields up himself to God: “Here I am, let the Lord deal with me as seems good to Him” (2 Sam 15:26). Not my will, but Thine be done. “The will of the Lord be done” (Acts 21:14). Out of our inferior reasons we may desire that God remove the cup; but when we look to the supreme reason of reasons, the will of God, here we must stoop and kiss the rod, and humble ourselves under His mighty hand.

He that endures anything will endure it quietly, when he knows it is the “will of God,” and considers that whatever befalls him comes from “His good pleasure.” Those that have not inured themselves to the yoke of obedience, will never endure the yoke of suffering—they fume and rage as a wild boar in a net. The man who establishes his soul on Christ will bear his afflictions; whereas the other rages like a fool. Nothing should displease us that pleases God; neither should anything be pleasing to us that displeases Him. We find by experience that when “our wills” are subject to “God’s will,” that we delight to do what God would have us do, and to be what God would have us be, that then sweet peace rises in the soul (cf. Ps 37).

When we can say, “Lord, if Thou wilt have me poor and disgraced, I am content to be so; if Thou wilt have me serve Thee in this condition I am in, I will gladly do so. It is enough to me that Thou wouldst have it so. I desire to yield readily, humbly, and cheerfully, to Thy disposing providence.” The wicked say that calamities rule over men, but a Christian has a spirit overruling all calamities. God’s kingdom comes where His will is being done. None feel more the sweet experience of God’s providence than those that are most resolute in their obedience.

We must not consult with flesh, for “self-love” will deprave all our actions, by setting before us corrupt ends. It considers not what is best, but what is safest. Where the aims are good, there God delighteth to reveal His good pleasure. In what measure any lust is favored, in that measure the soul is darkened. Even wise Solomon, while he gave way to his lust, had like to have lost his wisdom. Nature of itself is wild and untamed, and impatient of the “yoke”—but as beasts that cannot endure the yoke at first… after they are inured awhile unto it, they bear it willingly, and carry their work more easily by it; so the “yoke of obedience” makes the life regular and quiet. The more “passion,” the less discretion; because passion hinders the sight of what is to be done. It clouds the soul, and puts it on to action without advisement. Where passions are subdued, and the soul is purged and cleared, and there is nothing to hinder the impression of God’s Spirit; the soul is fitted as a clean glass to receive light from above.

Because it is not in man to “know his own ways,” we should look unto Christ, the great Counsellor of His Church, for counsel and direction… suggesting, “this is the way, walk in it.” We owe God this respect, to depend upon Him for direction in the particular passages of our lives, in regard that He is our sovereign, and His will is the rule, and we are to be accountable to Him as our Judge. Only God can see through all our circumstances. After prayer and trust follows the “peace of God” (Phil 4:6-7), and a heart void of division (Sibbes’ book on “Conflict” – pp. 151-159).

To know the will of God towards us, and our duty towards Him, we must first have a knowledge of the “promises of God.” We should never call God’s love into question—He not only gives us His promise, but hath entered into covenant with us through the blood of Christ; therefore, there should be no place left for doubting. Why should it not satisfy our souls to look upon promises in the word
of God? All our misery is either in having a false foundation, or else reckless building upon a true foundation; therefore having so strong a ground as God’s nature, His providence, His promises, to build upon, the only way for establishing our souls is “by trust” – relying firmly on Him. No man can know truth without the Spirit revealing it to the soul – furthermore, supernatural truths must have a supernatural power to apprehend them (cf. 1 Cor 2:14). The Spirit of God must likewise subdue the rebellion and malice of our will, so that it may be suitable to divine things; there will follow not only peace in the soul, but joy and delight surpassing any contentment the world offers. We should labor for a “single heart” to trust in God only, to rely upon Christ only, and to make the Scriptures our rule only – either we trust God alone, or not at all (cf. Mt 6:24).

It is the “office of faith” to quiet our souls in all the necessities of this life; we have continual use of trust while we are here. God trains us up this way, by exercising our trust in lesser matters, to fit us for greater matters. It pleases God to keep us in a state of “continual dependence” upon Him... who gives us the grace and spirit of faith needed to sustain our souls. Christians should labor their hearts to trust in God, even when no light of comfort appears either from within or without – when the darkness of the night is thickest, then the morning begins to dawn. In a hopeless estate a Christian will see some “door of hope” opened, first, because God shows Himself nearest to us, when we stand most in need of Him – He knows our souls best, and our souls know Him best in “adversity” (Ps 31:7); second, because our prayers then are “strong cries” fervent and frequent – God is sure to hear us at such a time, which pleases Him well, as delighting to hear the voice of His beloved. To encourage us in difficult times, and to help us trust God more, we should often call to mind the “former experiences” of God’s goodness. God is so good to His children even in this world, that He trains them up by daily renewed experiences of His fatherly care. The heart is never drawn to some sinful vanity, or frightening trouble, till faith first loseth the sight and estimation of divine things (Sibbes’ book on “Conflict” – pp. 160-170).
Consider the Following Additional Passages on Divine Providence

Gen 12:3 – “In you [Abraham] all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”
Gen 18:19 – “I have chosen Him [Abraham]... to keep the way of the Lord.”
Gen 50:20 – “You [Joseph’s brothers] meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”
Ex 10:1-2 – “I have hardened Pharaoh’s heart and the hearts of his servants.”
Ex 33:19 – “I will be gracious and compassionate to those whom I choose.”

Deut 2:30 – “The LORD hardened King Sihon’s heart and made him obstinate.”
Deut 7:6-8 – “The LORD has chosen you out of all people to be a people for His own possession.”
Deut 9:6 – “It is not because of ‘your righteousness’ that I did this... for you are a stubborn people.”
Deut 9:24 – “You have been rebellious against the LORD from the day I knew you.”
Deut 29:4 – “To this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know... nor ears to hear.”
Deut 30:6 – “One day the LORD will circumcise your heart to love the LORD your God.”

Josh 21:45 – “Not one of the promises the LORD has made to Israel has failed to come to pass.”
1 Sam 2:6-7 – “The LORD kills and makes alive... makes poor and rich... brings low and exalts.”
1 Chron 28:4 – “The LORD has chosen me [David] to be king... and the house of Judah to lead.”
Neh 11:1-2 – “The LORD chooses... and then we volunteer!”
Job 23:13-14 – “What His soul desires He does... He performs what is appointed for me.”

Ps 33:14-15 – “It is God who fashions the hearts of them all; He who understands all their works.”
Ps 100:3 – “It is God who has made us, and not we ourselves.”
Ps 115:3 – “Our God is in the heavens, and does whatever He pleases.”
Ps 127:1 – “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.”
Ps 135:6 – “Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, in heaven, in earth, and in the seas.”

Ps 138:8 – “The LORD will accomplish what concerns me.”
Ps 139:13 – “Thou didst form my inward parts; Thou didst weave me in my mother’s womb.”
Ps 139:16 – “In Thy book they were all written, all the days that were ordained for me.”
Prov 21:1 – “The king’s heart is like a channel of water in the hand of the LORD.”
Prov 20:24 – “Man’s steps are ordained by the LORD, how then can man understand his way?”

Is 10:5-7 – “Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger... I sent it against a godless nation.”
Is 10:15 – “Is the axe to boast itself over the one who chops with it?”
Is 14:27 – “What the LORD has planned, who can frustrate it?”
Is 22:11 – “You did not take into consideration Him who planned it long ago.”
Is 23:9 – “The LORD of hosts has planned [the destruction of Tyre] to defile the pride of all beauty.”

Is 43:13 – “From eternity I am He... I act and who can reverse it?”
Is 45:6-7 – “I am the One forming light and darkness; causing well-being and creating calamity.”
Is 45:12 – “It is I who made the earth and man... stretched out the heavens... ordained their host.”
Is 45:22-23 – “According to My Word... every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance.”

Is 46:9-11 – “I am God, and there is no other... declaring the end from the beginning.”
Is 48:11 – “For My own sake, I will act... My glory I will not give to another.”
Is 54:16 – “I Myself have created the smith to fashion a weapon... I created the destroyer to ruin.”
Is 55:8-9 – “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways.”
Is 55:11 – “My Words shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire.”
Jer 1:5 – “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and appointed you as a prophet to nations.”
Jer 4:28 – “I have spoken and purposed, and I will not change My mind, nor will I turn from it.”
Jer 10:23 – “A man’s way is not in himself; nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps.”
Jer 18:6 – “Like clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.”
Jer 18:11 – God uses “evil” for the purpose of helping initiate reform.

Jer 29:11 – “I know the plans I have for you… plans for welfare… a future and a hope.”
Jer 32:27 – “Behold, I am the LORD… is anything too difficult for Me?”
Lam 2:17 – “The LORD has done what He purposed… which He commanded from days of old.”
Ezek 12:25 – “I the LORD shall speak, and whatever word I speak will be performed.”
Ezek 24:14 – “I the LORD have spoken; it is coming and I shall act.”

Ezek 36:22-27 – Thus says the LORD, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations… I will vindicate the holiness of My Great Name… and the nations will know that I am the LORD… I will gather you from the nations [to which you were scattered]… then I will cleanse you from all your filthiness… and give you a ‘new heart’ and put a ‘new spirit’ within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh… I will put ‘My Spirit’ in you and cause you to walk in My ways.”

Ezek 37:5 – “Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life.”
Ezek 37:14 – “I will put My Spirit within you, and you will come to life.”
Ezek 38:23 – “I shall magnify Myself, sanctify Myself… and everyone will know I am the LORD.”
Dan 2:21 – “God is the One who changes the times, removes kings, and establishes kings.”
Dan 4:35 – “God does according to His will… no one can ward off His hand.”
Dan 5:23 – “Nebuchadnezzar, You have not glorified the God in whose hand are your life & ways.”

Amos 3:6-8 – “If a calamity occurs in a city, has not the LORD done it?”
Haggai 2:6-7 – “Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth.”
Haggai 2:22 – “I will overthrow the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the power of the nations.”
Zech 4:6-7 – “It is not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the LORD of hosts.
Matt 13:11 – “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom; to them it has not.”

John 1:13 – We are born again “not of the will of the flesh, or of man, but of the will of God.”
John 5:21 – “The Son gives life to whom He wishes.”
John 6:37 – “All the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and those who come to Me I will not reject.”
John 12:40 – “He blinded their eyes & hardened their hearts, lest they be converted and I heal them.”
John 15:16 – “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you… to bear much fruit.”

Acts 2:23 – “This Jesus, delivered up by the predetermined plan of God, you nailed to a cross.”
Acts 4:27-28 – “In this city [Jerusalem] there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.”
Acts 9:15 – “Go, for Paul is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles.”
Acts 13:48 – “When the Gentiles heard this, as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”
Acts 16:14 – “The LORD opened Lydia’s heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.”
Rom 8:28-29 – “God ‘causes’ all things to work together for good... to those who are ‘called’ according to His purpose... and predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.”
Rom 8:31 – “What shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?”
Rom 9:10-13 – “Rebekah conceived twins – Jacob & Esau – and before they were yet born, or had done anything good or bad, in order that ‘God’s purpose’ according to His choice might stand, it was said to her, ‘the older will serve the younger’ – as it is written, Jacob I loved, Esau I hated.”
Rom 9:16 – “So it does not depend on the man who wills... but on God who has mercy.”
Rom 9:19 – “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” – this is one of the great mysterious paradoxes of Scripture; divine sovereignty does not abolish human responsibility.
Rom 9:20-27 – “Does not the potter have a right over the clay? to make vessels of wrath, prepared for destruction... and vessels of mercy, prepared beforehand for glory?”
Rom 11:5 – “There has come to be at this time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice.”
Rom 11:28 – “From the standpoint of the gospel, the Jews are enemies for your (Gentiles) sake.”
Rom 11:29 – “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”
Rom 11:32 – “God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all.”
Rom 11:33 – “How unsearchable are God’s judgments and unfathomable His ways.”
Rom 11:36 – “From Him and through Him and to Him are all things.”

1 Cor 1:1 – “Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.”
2 Cor 7:9-10 – “You were made sorrowful to the point of repentance, according to the will of God.”
Gal 1:15-16 – “He set me (Paul) apart from my mother’s womb, and called me through His grace.”
Eph 1:4 – “He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.”
Eph 1:5 – “He predestined us to adoption as sons... according to the kind intention of His will.”
Eph 2:8-9 – “By grace we are saved through faith... it is not a result of works... it is a gift of God.”
Eph 2:10 – “We are created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”
Eph 3:11 – “This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which God carried out in Christ Jesus.”
Phil 1:29 – “It has been granted (root word “grace”) not only to believe but suffer for Christ’s sake.”
Phil 2:12-13 – “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that God is also at work in you, both to will and to do His good pleasure.”

Col 1:19-20 – “It was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Christ, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself.”
1 Thess 5:24 – “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”
2 Tim 1:9 – “God saved us, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose & grace.”
1 Pet 2:9 – “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood... a people for God’s own possession.”

Rev 13:8 – “Everyone will worship the beast, whose names have not been written from the foundation of the world in the Book of Life of the Lamb who has been slain.”
Rev 17:17 – “God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose.”
Rev 22:13 – “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”