

High in the Heavens, Eternal God

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

High in the heavens, eternal God,
Thy goodness in full glory shines;
Thy truth shall break thro' ev'ry cloud
Which veils and darkens thy designs.

Forever firm thy justice stands,
As mountains their foundations keep;
Wise are the wonders of thy hands,
Thy judgments are a mighty deep!

Thy mercy makes the earth thy care,
Thy providence is kind and large;
Angels and men thy bounty share,
The whole creation is thy charge.

Since of thy goodness all partake,
With what assurance may the just
Thy shelt'ring wings their refuge make,
And saints to thy protection trust.

Such guest shall to thy courts be led,
And there enjoy a rich repast;
There drink, as from a fountain head,
Of joys which shall forever last.

With thee the springs of life remain,
Thy presence is eternal day;
O let thy saints thy favour gain,
To upright hearts thy truth display.

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Providence

Kevin T. Bauder

On the one hand, a driver runs a red light and speeds toward you; he misses you at the last instant. You know you are unable to pay a bill, but an unexpected check arrives in the mail. A long-standing affliction is suddenly healed and you experience relief. A distant friend calls you during a difficult time with words of encouragement.

On the other hand, you experience a sudden illness and endure an unexpected surgery. An unforeseen complication arises as you are preparing to file your taxes. Your car develops serious problems, but the dealership claims that it is “in spec” and doesn’t qualify for warranty coverage. A loved one nears life’s end.

All the situations in the two previous paragraphs are true to life. You have experienced them or something like them. They represent the unanticipated blessings and calamities that fall upon God’s children.

They all occur under God’s Providence. When these circumstances favor us, as they do in the first paragraph, we recognize the hand of God and thank Him. But what if they do not favor us? What if they are like the second paragraph? Do these events somehow reflect less of God’s care in our lives? Are they no longer providential?

No, Providence is at work in everything that happens to us. Whether good or bad, God oversees all the events of our lives. Nothing, no matter how small, is outside the scope of His attention and direction.

That includes the events that we never even notice. We walk beside a tall building and no piano falls on us. We eat a dinner without choking to death. We put our key in the ignition and the car starts; we drive it without reflection. These ordinary events are governed by Providence, too.

What is Providence? It is God’s work in the world through secondary causes. When God operates directly in the world, we call it a miracle. No natural explanations are possible for miracles. Bread and fishes never multiply naturally. Stormy seas never go suddenly calm naturally. Dead people do not return to life naturally. When Jesus did these things, they were dem-



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onstrations of His kingdom power working directly upon the world. They were supernatural events. They were miracles, not providential occurrences.

On the other hand, providential events always have naturalistic explanations, even if those explanations are somewhat unlikely. Think of the farmer with a parched field. He prays, and a sudden thundershower saves the crop. The farmer rightly thanks God for the rain. But the meteorologist has another explanation, having tracked the storm front for a week.

Who is right, the farmer or the meteorologist? Was the rain a gift from God or was it a natural event? The doctrine of Providence says that both explanations are true. God was working through the storm to achieve His purpose for the farmer.

At the same time, God was using that storm front to achieve other purposes. God is infinitely wise. He is immeasurably powerful. He is capable of planning natural events to accomplish many ends at once. The same event may be greeted by some as a blessing and lamented by others as a burden. The storm that saved the crop also cancelled the ball game. The rain slowed traffic on the highway, where reduced visibility led to a crash. The runoff helped to fill the city's reservoir. All these results were planned and intended by a sovereign God.

Here is the marvel of Providence. None of these effects lies outside God's awareness. None of them is merely accidental or coincidental. God intends them all. Providence encompasses each one, and many more besides.

We experience many events as evils. Some of them really are. But if we are God's children, then we should know that God intends them all for our good. Providence may seem to frown, but it is never hostile to us.

Joseph experienced his brothers' betrayal as an evil, and the evil was real. When he eventually confronted his brothers, however, he offered a different perspective. What they intended for evil, God intended for good (Gen 50:20). Thus it is for all God's children at all times and in all places. The worst things that happen to us are still moving us toward the best possible results.

We naturally welcome Providence when it results in obvious and immediate blessing. We rejoice and thank God. We are right to do so. These events are certainly displays of God's benevolence and care.

But so are events that bring calamity. God is no less at work in the evils of our lives than He is in the blessings. And those evils, no less than the blessings, He intends for our good. While we may not thank Him for the evil itself, we can and should thank Him for the good that He will bring out of it.

These things are easy to say and write. They are much harder to remember when evil befalls. We are stunned when things turn sour. We lament when we are stricken with pestilence. We grieve when we stand beside the grave of a loved one. We feel torn when a relationship ruptures. But even then, we should remain steadfast in our trust of the God who governs through Providence.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
