

S T U D Y   G U I D E



# The Providence of God

by R.C. Sproul



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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# What Is Providence?

## MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The providence of God is the doctrine of God's involvement in the world and in the daily affairs of our lives. While the vast majority of people profess to believe in some kind of God or higher power, few seem to believe that God is actually involved in our daily lives. In this lesson, Dr. Sproul explains how God is the One who is aware of all that occurs in the universe and who cares about all that happens in our lives.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to define the concept of providence
2. To be able to explain the difference between proximate and ultimate causality
3. To understand why the doctrine of the providence of God should be a comfort to all Christians

## QUOTATIONS

*There are three things in providence: God's foreknowing, God's determining, and God's directing all things to their periods and events.*

— Thomas Watson

*The most strict and proper notion of Providence . . . is nothing else but the performance of God's gracious purposes and promises to His people. Payment is the performance of promises. Grace makes the promise, and Providence the payment.*

— John Flavel

## LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. The concept of God's providence has changed through history.
1. Until the nineteenth century there was an acute sense of God's overarching providence in which man assumed that God was all-powerful and directly involved in the daily lives of people.
  2. The cultural mentality of today is typified by the question: Is there anybody up there who can and will help me?
    - a. Twentieth-century man is unsure whether an omnipotent Being really exists.
    - b. He questions whether or not such a Being is personal and ultimately in charge of the universe.
    - c. If there is such a Being, modern man wonders if He has the ability to help.
    - d. And, if this God exists and is able, man questions His willingness to help.
- B. The concept of God's providence ultimately comes down to the issue of causality.
1. Twentieth-century man views life as a "closed mechanistic universe."
  2. Earlier cultures conceived of the universe as being directed by the "invisible hand" of God, who is ultimately responsible for everything.
  3. The focus of our modern culture is on proximate causes rather than the ultimate causal power — God; thus, modern man has no concept of providence.
    - a. The modern focus is on "having a religion — believing in something."
    - b. The focus should be on truth.
- C. The providence of God encompasses the concept of God as "spectator."
1. "Providence" literally means "seeing something beforehand."
  2. The God of Judeo-Christianity is the God who sees everything that takes place in the universe (John 8:4 ff.).
  3. This concept is both frightening and comforting.
    - a. A God who sees everything is frightening because sinful man desires a hiding place where he can be overlooked by God.
    - b. A God who sees everything is comforting because we are not afraid to be known intimately by a God who cares for us. We know that He is there and that He can and will help us (Matt. 10:29–31; 12:36).

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Until the \_\_\_\_\_ century, there was an acute sense of God's overarching providence in which man assumed that God was all-powerful and directly involved in the daily lives of people.
  - a. Twentieth
  - b. Nineteenth
  - c. Eighteenth
  - d. Seventeenth

- 
2. Twentieth-century man is unsure whether \_\_\_\_\_ really exists.
    - a. Evil
    - b. Reality
    - c. An omnipotent Being
    - d. None of the above
  
  3. Twentieth-century man questions whether or not God, if He exists, is \_\_\_\_\_.
    - a. Impersonal
    - b. Personal
    - c. A force
    - d. All of the above
  
  4. The concept of God's providence ultimately comes down to the issue of \_\_\_\_\_.
    - a. Causality
    - b. Necessity
    - c. Sufficiency
    - d. Personality
  
  5. Twentieth-century man views life as a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.
    - a. Closed mechanistic universe
    - b. Open naturalistic universe
    - c. Open mystical universe
    - d. Closed supernaturalistic universe
  
  6. Earlier cultures conceived of the universe as being directed by the \_\_\_\_\_ of God, who is ultimately responsible for everything.
    - a. Omnipresence
    - b. Invisible hand
    - c. Name
    - d. None of the above
  
  7. The focus of our modern culture is on \_\_\_\_\_ rather than the ultimate causal power.
    - a. Instrumental causes
    - b. Effectual causes
    - c. Material causes
    - d. Proximate causes
  
  8. "Providence" literally means \_\_\_\_\_.
    - a. Omnipotence
    - b. Ultimate causal power
    - c. Seeing something beforehand
    - d. None of the above

## BIBLE STUDY

1. In his lecture, Dr. Sproul said that in this day of unprecedented skepticism toward the very existence of God, people ask the question, Is there a personal Being in charge of the universe? Study Acts 17:24–28 and list Paul’s statements about God that indicate that He is indeed in charge of the universe.
2. Modern man asks another question: Is there anybody up there who can help me? How does Psalm 121 answer that question? In answering the question, first note all the specific statements in the Psalm about God’s help, then summarize them into a one-sentence statement about God’s help for you.
3. Dr. Sproul said that another question about providence is: If God exists, is He able to do anything with this world, and if He is able, is He willing to do anything about the daily circumstances of our lives? Study Psalm 23 and find at least six ways in which God is willing to do something within the daily affairs of our lives.
4. Study Psalm 104 and list several statements indicating that God, not a blind mechanical force, runs the universe. How do you reconcile these statements about the direct action of God in nature with what we know about the physical laws of nature?
5. The following are several Scripture passages that tell us what God sees. Briefly state the main point of each passage.
  - a. 2 Chronicles 16:9
  - b. Job 34:21–22
  - c. Psalm 33:13–15
  - d. Psalm 44:20–21
  - e. Proverbs 5:21
  - f. Jeremiah 23:23–24
6. According to 1 Chronicles 28:9, what else does God “see”?
7. Jesus taught that “the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt. 10:30). What was Jesus intending to communicate with that statement?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Dr. Sproul mean when he speaks of a “closed mechanistic universe”? Why is it important that Christians not adopt this view of the world?
2. How does the Christian doctrine of providence affect one’s understanding of the relationship between science and theology?

3. Over the last several centuries man has moved farther away from an understanding of the universe that incorporates God's providence to an understanding that doubts the very existence of God. What people, events, philosophies, theories, and other ideas helped to bring about this shift?
4. What does it mean to live by a practical atheism? Do you see such a practical atheism in the world today? Do you see hints of it in the church today?

#### APPLICATION

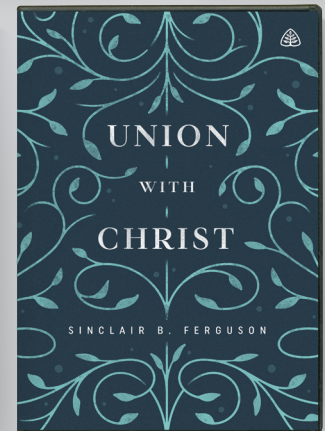
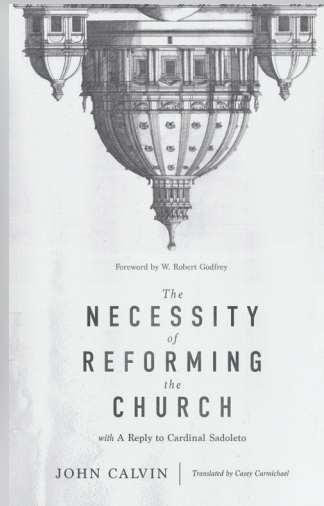
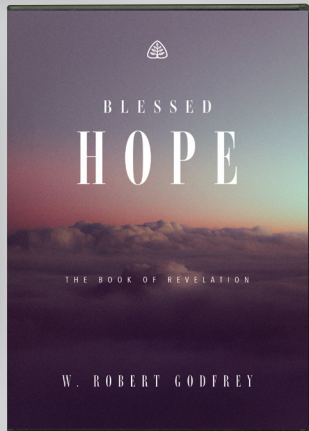
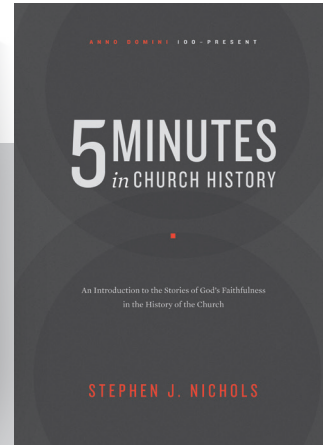
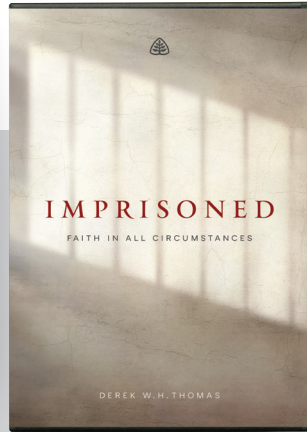
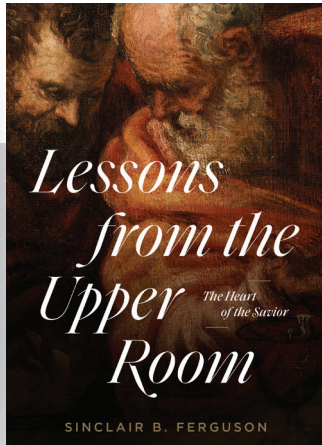
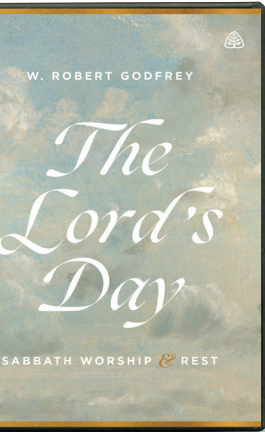
1. In what sense is it frightening to realize that God knows all of your thoughts, motives, words, and actions?
2. In what sense is it comforting to know that God knows all things and is in control of all things?
3. In what moments in your life would a proper understanding of God's providence have been helpful to you?
4. How can the realization of God's providential care help you to be completely honest before God? Identify two areas in which deeper honesty with God is needed. As you worship Him this week, commit yourself to bringing this before Him.

#### FOR FURTHER STUDY

Flavel, John. *The Mystery of Providence*



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