

THEISM

God Provides

Believers in God readily acknowledge that God provides everything. Before man was created, God prepared Adam's dwelling place in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8). God gives the breath of life (Genesis 2:7, Acts 17:25). He has determined the times and boundaries of human dwellings (Acts 17: 26). Every good and perfect gift comes from God (James 1:17).

However, because believers in God are sometimes uncertain about how God currently provides for human needs, some clarifying remarks may prove helpful. The first and most obvious way that God provides for human needs is through nature. God's provisions through nature are sometimes designated as God's *general providence*. Through nature all physical life now originates, whether plant, animal, or human. Through nature, all mechanisms for supporting physical life are furnished, e.g., air, food, water, etc. Technological comforts of modern life are also provided by God through nature. Admittedly, people must work for their food, clothing, shelter, and other physical needs, comforts and joys, but in the final analysis, God is the source of all natural provisions. These truths are readily acknowledged by believers and are seldom misunderstood.

A second way God has provided for human needs in times past (but which he does not now) is through miracle. The Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary defines a miracle as "an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed as a work of God." A few examples of miracles will illustrate how God has provided for his people. In the Old Testament, miracles were used to free the Israelites from bondage when plagues were sent upon the Egyptians (Exodus 7:14 – 12:30). By miracle, the Red Sea parted to allow the Israelites to cross on dry ground (Exodus 14:21-30). By miracle, manna was provided to Israelites in the wilderness for forty years (Exodus 16:35). By miracle, the Israelites crossed the Jordan River on dry land (Joshua 3:7 – 4:24). By miracle, the walls of Jericho came down, (Joshua 6:1-21) etc. In the New Testament, miracles were used by Jesus and his apostles to heal people and to cast out demons ((Matthew 4:24; Mark 1:34; Luke 4:40; 6:17; 9:1; Acts 19:12; 28:9). By miracle, Jesus provided food for four thousand people on one occasion (Matthew 15:32-38; Mark 8:1-9) and for five thousand on another (Matthew 14:14-21; Mark 6:34-44; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:5-13). By use of signs and wonders, the gospel message was confirmed (Hebrews 2:4). God's provisions through miracles were not only to benefit people, but more specifically they were to work his own will.

The third way God provides for human needs is sometimes designated as *special providence* or *Divine providence*. Care must be taken not to confuse special providence with natural providence or miraculous providence. Special providence is not miraculous. God's miraculous providence comes from his direct actions. God's special providence comes from his indirect control and guidance of natural events to accomplish his purposes. Some biblical examples may help clarify the meaning of special providence. (1) When Abraham went to a mountain in the land of Moriah with Isaac, he took no sacrificial offering. When Isaac asked his father about a sacrifice, Abraham responded by saying that "God will provide." Indeed, God did provide a ram to be sacrificed on that occasion. The ram was observed to have its horns caught in the thicket. "And Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, 'In the Mount of The LORD it shall be provided.'" (Genesis 22:14). (2) When Joseph was sold into Egyptian slavery, God was working out his will (Genesis 50:17-20). (3) After

Israelite midwives refused to kill male Israelite newborn babes, as instructed by Pharaoh, “it was so, because the midwives feared God, that He provided households for them” (Exodus 1:21 (4)). The Book of Esther declares how God’s preserved the Jewish people when they were in bondage. (5) The Apostle Paul prayed that he could go to Rome (Romans 1:9-10; 15:30-32), which he eventually did, being taken there as a prisoner by Roman authorities (Acts 21-28). Paul believed these things happened “unto the progress of the gospel” (Philippians 1:12). He believed he was able to proclaim the gospel because he had obtained “help from God” (Acts 26:22). Nothing miraculous occurred in these and a host of other biblical events, yet God so directed natural events to accomplish His purposes.

God’s special providence is often related to human behavior. When God answers prayers he does so by his special providence, i.e., through special control of nature. Hannah prayed for a son and vowed to give him to the Lord after he was born (1 Samuel 1:10-11). The Lord granted her request. Her son’s birth was not miraculous, but natural. Even so, Samuel’s birth was because God enabled Hannah to have the child. Samuel’s birth resulted from God’s special providence. Elijah prayed for rain and it came in abundance (1 Kings 18:41-46; James 5:17-18).

When people are wicked, God may direct natural activities in such a way that they reap the consequences of their wickedness. For example, when the man of God out of Judah disobeyed the Lord by dining with a false prophet in Bethel, God caused a lion to kill him as he returned home (1 Kings 13:23-26). When Ahab went into battle at Ramoth-Gilead, he was killed by an archer who drew his bow and shot at random. (2 Chronicles 18:12-34). When David committed adultery secretly with Bathsheba, God punished him by the “sword of the Lord” not departing from his house (2 Samuel 12:10-12).

Likewise, when people trust in God, he may direct the course of human events in such a way that people receive blessings. For example, Hezekiah trusted in the Lord God of Israel. “He held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses.” The result is that “The LORD was with him; he prospered wherever he went” (2 Kings 18:6-7). Because Ebed-Melech trusted in the Lord, his life was granted to him as a prize when the Babylonians came to destroy Jerusalem (Jeremiah 39:15-18).

In these and many other events mentioned in scripture, God works his will naturally in keeping with His ordinances that we reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7). God’s promise is that when people obey and trust Him, he will bless them, but when they disobey and distrust Him, he will curse them (Deuteronomy 28). God provides as he chooses – both blessings and curses – because God is sovereign in ruling individual and national events in the world.

Special providence is realized to have happened in biblical times because Scripture declares when and where it happened. However, people today cannot prove that God has worked special providence related to happenings in their own lives. People may believe it, and God may have indeed provided for them in special ways. Even so, because special providence operates indirectly within nature, people cannot now prove God’s special providence within their own lives. Proof of God’s special providence comes only from Divine revelation, and apart from Scripture, there is no Divine revelation today. Even so, belief in God’s special providence according to our trust and obedience in him fortifies believers to live better lives.