

John Piper. *Providence*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2021. 700pp. + 12pp. (front matter) + 40pp. (back matter).

Piper's work on divine providence is a *magnum opus* of mature, seasoned, theological thought that scouts out the global implications of this doctrine. The term *pastor-theologian* has become common currency of late. Piper's *Providence* exemplifies that combination; it is vigorously theological and insistently scriptural but also robustly pastoral, devotional, and applicational. *Providence* does not merely inform—it preaches.

A self-conscious sense of continuity guides the whole journey from beginning to end. Piper has painstakingly mapped out this journey and is careful to explain at the beginning of each chapter where we have been and, at the end of each chapter, where we are going. The excursion is divided into three unequal legs.

Part 1 (thirty pages) centers on “A Definition and a Difficulty.” Sovereignty conveys power, but providence adds the dimension of *purposefulness* (29). A concise expression of what Piper means by *providence* is God's all-embracing, all-pervasive, invincible, and purposeful sovereignty (18, 24; cf. 691). To several historic confessional definitions of providence Piper adds one additional clarifying statement: that God “freely and unchangeably ordain[s] and foreknow[s] whatever comes to pass . . . yet in such a way that He never sins, nor ever condemns a person unjustly” and in a way that “is compatible with moral accountability” (37). While Piper distinguishes between *providence* and *fate* (35–40), he never differentiates between *providence* and *miracle*, as is usual in many treatments of providence. The expansive scope of Piper's conception of providence explains the book's breadth (and length!).

The end for which God exercises his all-encompassing providence is no surprise: it is for his glory. But Piper helpfully teases out what that means (and what it does not). Confronting our inherent objections to such a self-exalting Deity, he concludes that “‘for his glory’ does not mean to *get* glory which he does not already have, but rather to display and vindicate and communicate his glory for the everlasting enjoyment of his people—that is, for all those who, instead of resenting God's self-exaltation, receive him as their supreme treasure” (43). That is, “God is really pursuing the exaltation of his beauty in the *enjoyment* of his praising people,” meaning that “*God's* self-exaltation is utterly different from all *human* self-exaltation” (53, 55). Indeed, as he says later, God “is the one being in the universe for whom self-exaltation is an act of supreme love” (208, 209).

Part 2 (150 pages) focuses on “The Ultimate Goal of Providence.” This divides into three subsections. Section 1 explores the goal of providence both before creation and in the act of creation. The first category entails election and is most directly addressed in Ephesians 1: “not simply God's glory, but the *praise* of his glory” (1:6, 12, 14), and more specifically, “the praise of the glory of his *grace*.” That praise is the response of those chosen by that grace even “before the foundation of the world” (1:4). Then, in the act of creation, God “creates human beings in his image” and “commands that the earth be full of such images of himself,” making it “clear that God's goal in creation is the display of God” (62). But it is God's grace before the beginning that guarantees “the final worship of

heaven will be not simply . . . an echo of God's excellence in creation, but also . . . an echo of Christ's excellence in salvation" (64).

Section 2 of part 2 concentrates on the goal of providence in the history of Israel. From God's call and covenant with Abraham to the creation of the nation at Sinai to the distant future "when ethnic Israel . . . will be grafted back into the olive tree of Abraham's covenant blessing," the goal of all God's providential dealings with Israel is the praise of his glory and grace (Isa 43:7, 21; 49:3; 60:21; 61:3; Jer 13:11). It is mildly disappointing that two pages unfold the significance of Isaiah 55:12–13 (82–83) yet overlook the burning bush that guarantees these remarkable eschatological blessings—the absolute trustworthiness of every word from the mouth of God (55:10–11). Piper perceptively explores ten theological ramifications of the divine name "I AM" revealed to Israel in connection with the exodus (90–92) and traces the repeated purpose of God to make himself known not only to Israel and to Egypt but to all the nations (93–94). Insights like gems strew the long journey tracing God's providence throughout Israel's history. "This commandment ("You shall have no other gods before me") was to be no more burdensome than the satisfied experience of a wife who has a perfect husband" (122). "The essence of sin is minimizing God and making much of self" (127). "Hezekiah's prayer did not appeal to the worthiness of Jerusalem to be rescued but to the worthiness of God to be worshiped" (141). "God's God-centeredness . . . is not a threat to our joy but the basis of it" (150).

Section 3 of part 2 explains the goal of providence in the design and enactment of the New Covenant. Here some of the weaknesses (in my opinion) of a covenantal approach surface. For example, the text of Jeremiah 32:39–41 is quoted (160), including the astonishing statement, "I will rejoice in doing them good, *and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness*, with all my heart and with all my soul." Yet Piper's explanation of the passage twice omits the text's explicit connection of God's whole-hearted, whole-souled commitment to Israel's restoration to the land. Instead, Piper's takeaway focuses exclusively on the soteriological and sanctificational blessings of the New Covenant. "God will rejoice over this transformed people with all his heart and with all his soul" (159), and God "pledges to secure these blessings with overflowing joy: 'I will rejoice in doing them good . . . with all my heart and all my soul'" (160). The soteriological blessings are grand indeed, but they are only the starting point of God's New Covenant promises to Israel. Nevertheless, Piper rightly identifies "one of the earliest expressions of the new covenant" in Deuteronomy 30 (161).

Piper writes that "the ultimate goal of God in his saving providence . . . was achieved through the suffering of the Son of God"—which means that "the ultimate reason that suffering exists is so that Christ might display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God by suffering himself to overcome our suffering" (171). But how did suffering originate? "If God planned the suffering of his Son before creation . . . then he foresaw the coming of sin and planned to permit it to enter the world" (175). Piper helpfully defends the notion of God's permission, "since God's providence does not govern all events in precisely the same way, and 'permission' is one way to describe some of his acts of providence"—including the Fall (175–79). Another feature of the New Covenant that Piper develops is the "progressive glorification" of his people (187ff.).

In part 3 (500 pages) Piper explores "The Nature and Extent of Providence." Having identified and elaborated on the goal of God's providence, Piper turns his attention in this largest section of the

book to the “nature and extent” of providence: “The new question is not *Where* is God taking the world? but *How* does he see to it (providentially!) that it gets there?” (207). What does providence include, what does it look like in operation, and—if it includes governing sinful human choices—how does he exercise this providence without becoming culpable for human sin (210)? Each succeeding chapter in this section explores the all-inclusive realms over which God’s providence reigns: nature, Satan and demons, kings and nations, life and death, sin, conversion, and Christian living, and global missions. And folded into each chapter are discussions of how his providence operates without impugning his righteousness.

Some of these discussions are extraordinarily astute and helpful. For example, God’s providential control over both natural, humanly instigated, and even demonically instigated events should have a profound impact on how we react to them. On the other hand, some of these discussions could use a bit more clarification. What, exactly, *is* the *nature* of God’s providential involvement in the growth of grass and the falling of rain, or in the sinful choices of a powerful king? Piper and I appear to disagree on the causes and progression of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart; but we may be closer than it seems if Piper were to apply to his treatment of Pharaoh some of the qualifying statements he makes elsewhere in the book, particularly concerning the *nature* and *means* of his providential control. (See my article on the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in this issue of *JBTW*.)

In any case, Piper’s work is peppered with insights that are both thought-provoking and inspiring. “The fear of the Lord is not the opposite of joy in the Lord; it is the depth and seriousness of it” (160). God’s judgment on Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4) demonstrated not only that “self-exaltation dethrones God” but also “dehumanizes man. The irony is that human autonomy feels like we have gained significance, when in fact we have lost sanity” (331). “God’s rule of every life is not bad news. It is glorious news” (375). Repentance “is one of the reasons God judged moral evil with physical pain. While fallen people do not value God, they do value being pain free. . . . God puts the call to repentance in the language everyone can understand—the language of pain and death” (504). Piper’s argument for the salvation of infants who die based on Romans 1:19–20 is intriguing (507–8).

It is in his conclusion, “Seeing and Savoring the Providence of God” (twenty pages), that Piper summarizes the fundamental tenets of his book most concisely. “Providence is the purposeful sovereignty that carries [God’s] plans into action, guides all things toward God’s ultimate goal, and leads to the final consummation” of all his purposes (691). It encompasses everything, including “the moral acts of every soul” but in such a way “that the preferences and choices of Satan and man are really their own preferences and their own choices” (691–92). That means that “God’s providence is decisive . . . but it is not coercive. That is, its ordinary way of working is to see to it [the literal meaning of *providence*] that Satan and man decide and act in a way that is their own preference, while fulfilling God’s plan at every moment” (692). This crucial and biblical qualification would have been enormously helpful and clarifying to incorporate into his discussion of Pharaoh. “*How* God does this” is, indeed, a mystery, “but *that* he does it is what the Bible teaches” (*ibid.*). (Psalm 33:15, a natural fit for this point, unfortunately does not surface in the book.) Piper tops off this monumental study with ten effects of embracing a biblical understanding of God’s providence, including its impact on our worship, our worldview, our appreciation of our salvation, our relationship to the surrounding culture,

our perception and interpretation of all reality, our patience and faithfulness amid difficult and inexplicable experiences, our resistance to unbiblical explanations, our confidence “that God has the right and the power to answer prayer” to change people’s hearts, our persuasion of the necessity of evangelism and missions, and our assurance of God’s eternal glory in us through our satisfaction in him (694–711).

Providence includes both a general and biblical index but, interestingly, no bibliography. That helps to explain an anomaly that immediately strikes the reader—the sparsity of footnote citations. The book includes only 116 footnotes (an average of one note every six pages); forty percent of the footnotes reference Piper’s other works or discussions elsewhere in the book itself. That is not particularly surprising, given Piper’s maturity and stature as a theologian and the breadth and theological depth of his other writings. What is perhaps a little surprising, especially for a book of this size and nature, is that only thirty-two percent cite outside sources, the most common being (unsurprisingly) Jonathan Edwards (ten times). The rest furnish either additional Scripture or some expanded explanation beyond the main text. Though Piper never explains this aspect of his writing strategy, one assumes that his goal was to concentrate our attention primarily on the teachings and implications of the biblical text itself, without bogging down the reader in either the debates or corroborations of other theologians—not unlike a massively extended, magisterial sermon. (Another reviewer describes it as “a long, sermonic essay.”) It lends the work a certain biblical-theological purity and authority, but some may wish for more pervasive evidence of interaction on a topic with such far-reaching theological implications.

Layton Talbert

Professor of Theology | BJU Seminary