



A TEN-LESSON BIBLE STUDY

God's Mysterious Ways

EMBRACING GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN ESTHER

Jane Roach

God's sovereignty and providential care over all things is one of the most important and foundational doctrines of our faith. It is one that anchors us in times of trial. Jane Roach's study on Esther shows us God's providence in the life of an unlikely queen. This theologically rich study takes us through the pages of God's Word to see that all God's purposes come to pass

—**Christina Fox**, Author, *A Heart Set Free*

God's Mysterious Ways offers women a thought-provoking, heart-igniting exploration of God's quiet but invincible providence displayed in the life of Esther. Jane Roach's insightful study-and-discussion questions and clear exposition blend serious engagement with the scriptural text with a focus on Christ, our true Rescuer. Contemporary testimonies show what it looks like to live in the confidence that God works all things—both pleasant and painful—together for good to those whom he has called by grace in the gospel. Gather some sisters and work together through this study of Esther. It will move you to worship the Lord in awe at all times, and to rest in his sovereign wisdom and love in times of trial.

—**Dennis E. Johnson**, Author, *Walking with Jesus through His Word*

Jane Roach's Bible study on Esther is doctrinally rich and spiritually uplifting. This resource will be a tremendous aid to personal worship and devotional study, as well as for small group discussions. Discover God's providence in Esther and you will learn to see God's presence in your own life.

—**Richard D. Phillips**, Senior Minister, Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville

To have a robust and “no-risk” view of providence is essential for spiritual sanity, strength and stamina. Few books of the Bible teach providence with greater candor than Esther, and Jane Roach’s no-nonsense approach, in ten accessible, practical chapters, provides an ideal manner of studying both the book of Esther and its central theme of providence. I foresee personal and group bible studies making this book their choice in the near future, and returning to it again and again. A marvelous aid that will do a great number of people much good.

—**Derek W. H. Thomas**, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia

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Jane Roach



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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ISBN: 978-1-62995-224-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-225-3 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-226-0 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

To my heavenly Father,
who has opened my eyes to see his providence
and my heart to embrace it

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Foreword

FOR THE SEARCHER, the seeker, there is a treasure to be found! It is as a diamond whose many facets combine with exquisite sparkling beauty and simplicity. Jesus spoke of it as a “treasure hidden in a field” (Matt. 13:44) and a “pearl of great value” (Matt. 13: 46).

What is this treasure of unspeakable radiance? It is the kingdom of God; it is the divine disclosure that God in Jesus Christ has leaped from the realms of glory and magnificence into our world of twistedness and blight. It is an altogether breathtaking reality that causes all others to pale in comparison. It is such that the grandeur of the great Grand Canyon—with ever-changing hues and designs endlessly repainted by the clouds across its undulating landscape—loses its shocking magnificence in comparison. What is initially spellbinding becomes a mere picture of the beauty and glory that alone belongs to God. What is this valuable treasure, this “pearl of great value”? It is the revelation to us that Jesus came into our world to change it forever; the evidence is enshrined, preserved, and protected for us in the Bible.

To have this great book is indeed a treasure, but it must be opened for us to experience its delights. This unique of all communications explains how God willed to redeem out of human lostness and tragedy a people for his own delight and possession.

As marvelous as that is, there is more. This great book tells us how to find comfort, instruction, and insight into how we are to live for him as we await the day when we shall see the one who loves us so profoundly. It tells us that the saving God is also one who preserves and protects his children, blood-purchased by his own dear Son; he is concerned not only that we come to him but also that we find our refuge in him, preserving us by his providential care so that “not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven” (The Heidelberg Catechism, Q.#1).

Among the many places in the Bible where this truth is illumined, perhaps there is none as gripping and vivid in story form as that in the book of Esther. What comfort to see and know that God cares for us, working all things according to his good pleasure.

I heartily commend this study guide, which comes from the hand and heart of a seasoned, godly exemplar of the truth.

John D. Hannah
Distinguished Professor of Historical Theology
Research Professor of Theological Studies
Dallas Theological Seminary
Dallas, Texas

Preface

WHO IS IN CHARGE? This is the fundamental question that the serpent posed to Eve and to every person since Eden. This question is in the forefront of our minds even when we are young. When one of my grandsons was three years old, his mother left him in my care at my home. As she was driving away, he put his hands on his hips, pulled back his shoulders, looked at me, and asked with an authoritative tone, “Well, who’s in charge here?”

After I got over the shock, I got down to his level and looked him in the eye, replying, “You are not.” He literally shook with surprise. We had a lovely conversation with him sitting on my lap as I explained that he was our guest and we were responsible for his care when he was with us. He was satisfied and we had a wonderful time together.

People still ask this same question in many different ways. Is there a God? If so, what is he like? Is God a person or a force? How does he relate to the world and people today? Is there objective truth? Are there objective standards? Does God have a Son? How many ways are there to salvation? What part does God play in evil? Who are the Jews and why is their history filled with efforts to eliminate them? Where is our world headed? What can we do to change the direction? Who decides the answers to these questions?

I have encountered people who answer these questions without a frame of reference outside of themselves. They sincerely believe mutually exclusive statements at the same time and see no contradiction. The need to know God as he has revealed himself in the Bible prompted me to teach a women's Bible study on the book of Esther, emphasizing the providence of God. It was delightful to encounter the class members in the community and hear them talking about God's providence, a topic previously not part of their conversations.

God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, yet it has many hints of his presence. The compelling narrative presents God as the all-powerful one who sovereignly directs history according to his predetermined plan. It has a message of hope for God's people in every age and culture.

While the world attempts to change the decrees of God the Creator, they will not succeed. God, not political leaders, will have the final say in what is right and wrong. God providentially watches over his people, and nothing and no one will ultimately prevail against them. In fact, those who attempt to destroy God's people find themselves fighting against God.

We might wonder where God is today. The spectacular gets our attention rather than the ordinary providence of God at work in our lives. Pop culture and the news celebrate those who assert their independence from God rather than the faithful who trust God day after day, in success and failure, sickness and health, joy and sorrow. Even in the professing church, people are often more concerned with what they have or do or appear to be than with who they are in Christ. When it seems God is nowhere to be seen, Esther provides a snapshot of our infinite God at work behind the scenes. God is already where we will be tomorrow. He is working out his divine plan for his glory and our eternal

good. We need no “plan B”; God’s perfect plan is being accomplished. This book invites you to take God at his Word in the mysterious fulfillment of all his promises. Its message is needed in the world today.

Esther is a book named after a woman, but it is part of God’s revelation for all—men, women, and children. God reveals his providence that we may understand it and embrace it for our lives. To embrace means to cherish and hold dear. May you see and embrace God’s providence in your personal life, your family, your church, your nation, and the world through taking a step back in time into the historical narrative of Esther.

Acknowledgments

GOD PROVIDENTIALLY brought people to teach me about him and his providence. My parents, other family members, Sunday school teachers, and a dear lady from my childhood church, Anna Mae Arnholt, were instrumental in my knowledge of God. As an adult, I was greatly influenced by A. Wetherell Johnson, Rosemary Jensen, James Montgomery Boice, John Hannah, and the writings of Elisabeth Elliot.

My husband, Jim, has often been a sounding board for me as I wrestled with ideas in this book and has prayed faithfully for me. My pastor, Dr. Allen Taha, has supported and encouraged me wholeheartedly throughout the process of writing this book. I am grateful for the people who have endorsed this book and encouraged me to write it. Thanks to Karen Smith and Linda Cress, who have read this manuscript, offering valuable ideas and corrections. Thanks to Debra Butts, who has read and reread and reread this manuscript, offering practical edits. God has providentially brought them into my life for such a time as this.

My longtime friend Carla Northington has graciously allowed me to teach the Bible study she has hosted for more than fifteen years. The women in this class have embraced the format of the study and, more importantly, the providence of God. The women of my church, Trinity Presbyterian in Boerne, Texas, diligently

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

studied and openly shared their discoveries. Both groups of women have willingly shared their lives with me through our study of Esther, the fruit of which is this book. Their honest remarks have enriched my own understanding of God's providence. My friends and some of these class members have graciously agreed to tell their stories of God's providence in their daily lives, catastrophes, emergencies, joys, and sorrows. I am richer for knowing them during these times and for thinking through God's providential ordering of my own life. God works in mysterious ways as he makes himself known to his people.

Chad Swanson and Pat Macfarlane kindly helped with author videos and photographs. I am grateful to Amanda Martin, Julia Craig, and the entire P&R Publishing staff for their help and encouragement as well. To God be the glory for ordering my steps and opening doors for me. Great things he has done!

Introduction:

Planning Ahead

ONE OF MY HOBBIES is counted cross-stitching. As I begin a piece, I look at the pattern, take inventory of the thread, and gather the necessary materials: light, frame, scissors, and other essentials for the project. I determine when I will stitch and when I will put it aside until the next opportunity. Too much at one time is not as profitable as smaller amounts at a measured pace. Allowing time to complete a gift before it needs to be wrapped and presented provides joy; rushing through to meet an imminent deadline guarantees mistakes that require pulling out threads and retracing steps. The project changes from pleasure to labor.

The same idea is helpful for other projects, including Bible study. I have found it helpful to study the Bible with some plan in mind. The plan is not law and should not degenerate into a checklist. It may vary some from day to day. However, a small daily taste with time to ingest and digest what I have read is better than a fire-hydrant gulp only once a week. I prefer to study in the morning, my best time of day. This morning routine gives me food for thought throughout the day. I prepare by having ready my Bible, paper, and pen to ask and answer questions

about the text and by finding a place of solitude to read and pray as I study. I add to my study notes ideas I want to remember, other questions I want answered, and possible applications of the passage to my life. Allowing the text to ask questions of me further cements the truth of the passage in my mind and allows it to move into my heart and through my body—eyes, ears, mouth, hands, and feet.

The questions in this book are designed to provide a plan of study as well as the end result of knowledge about God that leads to embracing what he has revealed about himself. As you begin the study of Esther, let me encourage you to begin and end with God. A simple plan may help you get started. Read the pages of the lesson in the order they are presented in the text:

- **Worship:** Scripture text, truth, and hymn
Use the text and hymn as the basis for worshipping God. Recount to him words of adoration related to what is revealed about him in the brief passage and hymn text. Sometimes, I read the hymn text without the music. Other times I sing the hymn text. Sometimes I do both.
- **Word:** Bible text and truth
The Bible is God's word to you. Reading and pondering it is the most important part of each lesson.
- **Wisdom:** Opening prayer, questions, and commentary
The opening prayer is an example of a simple prayer for God to direct your study and give you wisdom to understand and believe what you read.

Answer the questions from the Bible before reading a commentary. The spaces allotted in the book are designed to help you. Some questions ask you to give the facts stated

in a given passage. Others require you to draw conclusions about the truth that flows from those facts. Still others go another step to apply the truth to your life. Allow God to speak to you without the distraction of another's words. If you seem unable to answer a question, come back to it later. You may be surprised that you have been pondering it when you were not consciously thinking about it, and now you have an answer.

Read the commentary, including all the Scripture references. Remember, God's Word is most important. Highlight or underline helpful statements.

- **Worship: Closing prayer**

The closing prayer includes adoration of God as well as petitions for God's direction as you seek to implement the truth you have learned in your life. Write your own prayer that reflects what you have learned in the lesson.

The format of each chapter is also designed to be an aid to Bible teachers or leaders of groups. Perhaps you are saying, "Oh, I could never teach." God usually asks me to do something before I think I can, so that I depend on him. Esther's answer might work for you: "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). Living by faith is being on the cutting edge, and it is exciting!

Throughout the study, we will consider words of different hymn writers and also refer back to the hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." May you exult in the ways you see him moving in your life and respond with trust in him as your sovereign, powerful, providential, and personal God.

LESSON 1

Embracing God's Providence

For from him [God] and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:36)

Texts

Genesis 1:1; Psalms 104:24–30; 139:16; Proverbs 21:1; and others related to God's providence.

Truth

God infallibly and sovereignly works to accomplish his plan.

Hymn: "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise"

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all, life thou givest, to both great and small,
In all life thou livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
All praise we would render; O help us to see
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth thee!

—WALTER CHALMERS SMITH, 1867

Opening Prayer

O God, the immortal, invisible, and only wise God. You are hidden from my eyes and yet you have opened them to see your hand in providing for my practical needs, my longing for meaning, and my hope for the future, both temporal and eternal. You turn darkness into light and make rough places smooth. Please open my eyes to see your providence in my life. Teach me what your providence is, and enable me to embrace it in my life, my family and friends, my church, my nation, and the world. Great Father of glory, pure Father of light, help me see that only the splendor of light hides you from me. For your glory. Amen.

Questions for Study and Discussion

Question 11 of the *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks, "What are God's works of providence?" The answer states, "God's works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions."

God's Providence in Creation

► READ GENESIS 1:1

1. Describe God's relation to creation.
2. How would you explain God's purposes in creating the heavens and earth?

3. What is the definition of “providence”?

God's Providential Care of His Creation

▶ READ PSALM 104:24–30

4. How are creation and providence related?

God's Providence over All of Life

▶ READ PSALM 139:16 AND PROVERBS 21:1

5. What do these verses reveal about God's providence in life and death?

6. What part does faith play in embracing God's providence?

EMBRACING GOD'S PROVIDENCE

7. How does God's providence show his personal care for his people? Give an example from your own life, if possible.

8. Does God providentially ordain evil? Explain your answer using any portion of Scripture.

9. What are some practical implications of believing in God's providence?

10. How does God's providence show you how to respond when things go poorly?

Commentary

I love it when my grandchildren come running and cling to me. That is what “embrace” means, is it not? You cling to what you know and love. Our opening prayer began, “O God.” He is the reason we study the Bible. We study that we may know him as he has revealed himself in his Word. Because we will never know him fully, for he is infinite, we have a lifelong purpose—to strive to learn all we can about God. As we begin this study, we will seek to understand God’s providence that we may then be able to recognize and embrace it both in the book of Esther and our own lives. We begin with God himself, the only true God.

Who God Is

He Created the World to Reveal His Glory

God alone is uncreated; he existed before matter, time, and space. God made the world by his powerful word (Psalm 33:6). All that he made exists by him, through him, and for him (Romans 11:36). We understand that our galaxy is but one of many; only God knows how many. What wisdom, what power our Creator has! All that God created is his and subject to him, the only self-existent being (Job 38:1–42:6). He is sovereign, highest in rank and authority. That is what it means to be God.

Why did he create the physical realm? The main reason is that God delights in revealing his perfect nature. Both angelic and human beings observe aspects of his character, such as his wisdom, eternal power, and divine nature in his creation (Romans 1:20). As they respond with reverence and awe, believing there is

a Creator who fashioned the world out of nothing, God is glorified. God also beholds himself in his creation and is glorified.

The Creator Is Also the Sustainer of All

God did not create and then leave the world to its own ways. God designed each and every part of it—from the splendid galaxies to the minute nanoplankton—to fit perfectly into his creation, and he sustains them by his knowledge and power.

From spring until early summer, newborn fawns are dropped in our yard, where we enjoy watching them. By God's design, they have no scent until they are able to run fast enough to escape predators. If the doe stays with the fawn, her scent will attract the predators, so she leaves it alone. She returns periodically to nurse and clean it after scouting the area for danger. The fawn does not move until she signals it is safe. How she signals is not clear to me, but it seems to be a flick of her tail or a special sound. This is just one animal perfectly designed for its part in God's earth. Jesus said, "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Matthew 6:26, 28–29). God receives glory as he sustains what he created.

The Apex of God's Creation Is Humanity

God created man and woman in his image so they could reflect his glory back to him. He sovereignly sets his affection on people according to his purposes and will. He guarantees that his purposes for each person and for all people will come to pass. Derek Thomas says, "Providence suggests God's care of the world, both his supervision of all events and circumstances

and his provision for all of our needs. It is more than God's ability to 'see' into the future; it is his active and determined care to ensure that what he has promised for us actually does come to pass."¹

God Has an Eternal Plan and Purpose for His Creation

God Has Purpose in What He Made, How He Made It, and Why He Made It

God has purpose in how he created each part of what he made. Above all, God's creation is to bring glory and pleasure to him. John Hannah credits Jonathan Edwards with the thought that God delights not in seeing his creation in itself but rather seeing himself in his creation.² His creation is to reveal his glory (the outshining of his perfect character), to display his eternal power and divine nature. His power is eternal because it acted before he created time. His creation reveals his divine wisdom, compassion, sovereignty, omnipresence, omniscience, holiness, justice, and providence.

God also created the earth to provide for the needs of his creatures: an inhabitable environment with temperate climates, food and water, breathable air for our lungs, beautiful sunrises, thunder and lightning, rain, trees and plants, and animals.

God created people to relate to him with truth, intimacy, joy, and love—to walk with him, talk with him, know him, enjoy him, praise him, thank him, worship him, and glorify him. To

1. Derek W. H. Thomas, *What Is Providence?*, Basics of the Faith (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 6.

2. John D. Hannah, *To God Be the Glory*, Today's Issues (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 19.

glorify means to call attention to his greatness, to point the spotlight on him by our testimony and by reflecting his character. Why do we not do that? God did not make robots. He gave the first human pair, Adam and Eve, responsibility to obey him out of love for him. He gave them everything they needed for life. He also gave them one prohibition—not to eat of a certain tree, lest they die. What did they do with this responsibility? They doubted his word and disobeyed him, wanting to be like him, deciding what was right and wrong for themselves. They usurped his authority over them as their Creator. They wanted to be “in control” of their lives.

Adam and Eve lost their freedom to serve God from a pure heart. They exchanged the inferior substitute of asserting their will for the infinite value and beauty of glorifying God. The beautiful, perfect relationship was over. They hid from him because they knew they had done wrong. They were alienated from him. All of their descendants, including us, fell with them. Adam and Eve's disobedience was no surprise to God. His plan to glorify himself and have a people specially related to him would not be thwarted by their disobedience.

Before God created the world, he had determined his plan of redemption. He predetermined how it would be played out for individuals, nations, and his specially chosen people. This is not plan B. God has always had only one plan. God immediately promised he would send a Redeemer descended from the woman (Genesis 3:15). He would remove his people's alienation from God and restore harmony with him. God designed his creation to glorify his eternal Son as the promised Redeemer who would redeem a people set apart for himself and set apart from sin. He is the main character of the entire Bible. He is both the eternal Son of God (God the Son) and the true man, Jesus of Nazareth.

History is his story. Through him, God displays his grace, mercy, and sovereignty toward undeserving people without sacrificing his holiness, justice, and righteousness.

The Bible Is the Record of God's Outworking of His Plan

The Bible tells us that God foreknew those who would be part of the people specially related to him. "Foreknew" in this sense does not mean knowledge of something before it happens; it does not mean that God looks forward and sees who will love him and thus he chooses them. "Foreknew" means that God set his affection on certain individuals before the creation of the world, before they even existed, much less did anything to merit his love. These individuals he "foreknew" in the special relationship with him for which they were designed but missed through sin, and he purposed and orchestrated his plan toward them. He gave these chosen ones to the Redeemer, his unique Son, as a special love gift (John 17). The purpose of his affection was to reconcile them to him in this life and to prepare them for the new heavens and earth that he would create in the future. In this new creation, there will be no evil and no temptation to sin because it will be a "sin-free" environment inhabited by "free-from-sin" people.

What God's Providence Is

God's Providence Is His Infallible Accomplishment of His Predetermined Plan

Infallible means perfectly in accord with his purpose and will. There is no room for error of any kind. God has knowledge in accord with his purposes for animate and inanimate things,

individuals and nations, hours and ages, birth and death, catastrophes and calm, sun and rain, famine and feast, heaven and earth—whew! Nothing surprises God or escapes his notice. He is not restricted by our choices or actions, as though he needs to wait for us to make a move before he knows what to do in response to accomplish his plan. Some say that God is omniscient over all (knows everything) that has already happened, but he does not know everything in the future until he sees the choices of people. Then he responds to their choices or the consequences of those choices. This puts people or “fate” in control of God rather than God in control of people and all things. Nothing could be further from the biblical teaching of God’s omniscience, sovereignty, and providence.

God Knows What Needs to Happen and When for His Predetermined Purposes

Derek Thomas presents three views of God’s providence.³ The classical view is that God foreknows because he foreordains. This is the view on which this study is based. His will determines the future before any person ever acts (Ephesians 1:3–10). God is neither late nor early. He is always on time. He has “previously” been where we are today, preparing exactly what we need according to his predetermined purposes for us. It is not fate or fortune that determines what occurs in our lives. Neither is it solely our choices. Do not worry about tomorrow; God is already there.

When I was a teenager, I helped my father proofread work that he had typeset during the day. Thirty-five years later, when I started work at Bible Study Fellowship (BSF) headquarters,

3. Thomas, *What Is Providence?*, 17.

I was asked, “Do you proofread?” It was one of the “extras” I did there. God providentially prepared me in advance to be able to meet that need.

God Sustains and Governs in Accord with His Perfect Character and Will

God is love. He is all-wise and all-knowing, holy and perfect, merciful and just. He is good, righteous, infinite, immutable, incomprehensible, unsearchable, and omnipresent. He is not random, arbitrary, or chaotic. He is purposefully working toward his predetermined purpose and end for every part of his creation. We are not victims of chance or luck. The prophet Isaiah writes,

Remember this and stand firm

.

I am God, and there is no other;

I am God, and there is none like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, “My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,”
calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man of my counsel from a far country.

I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;

I have purposed, and I will do it. (Isaiah 46:8–11)

God's Providence Is Both Gracious and Mysterious

We sometimes think we are free to do whatever we choose. But real freedom is having the will and power to do what God wills for us. Our plans mean nothing unless they align with God's plans. God graciously and mysteriously works his will

in and through our choices. “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). Even when our choices contradict his will and purposes, he is able to cause them to work toward his predetermined end (Romans 8:28–29).

If we are broken and not living as he purposed, is there a way to be restored to him? Yes, broken and lost people can be restored to God through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer God provided. People already redeemed need renewed faith, strength, and power to live for his glory in an imperfect world that opposes him and tries to get rid of him. God works all things toward his end of making us like his Son so that we may have an intimate relationship with him through Jesus Christ.

Faith in God’s Providence Has Practical Implications

Belief in God’s providence has had some very practical implications for my life. I have included a few of my experiences to help you consider God’s providence in your life.

Faith in God’s Providence Replaces Fear with Confident Trust

I boarded an airplane ten days after September 11, 2001, to travel to Australasia to do God’s work planned three years before the terrorist attack. Was God surprised by the attack? No! Was he directing my steps in accordance with his plan? Yes! What if I died? “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). I boarded the plane, trusting God’s providence. What causes you fear? How might God’s providence

help you face the imminent death of yourself or a loved one? Life is moving toward eternity and our glorification in God's way and time; we can trust him in it.

Faith in God's Providence Provides a Way to Discern His Will in Specific Situations

When asked to serve in our church or community, I wonder, *Should I say yes?* I can ask questions related to God's purposes: What decision will most glorify God? What resources has he given me for this situation? How will it make me more like Jesus? I have found God never asks me to do something when I think I am ready. I always think, *Maybe next year!* God wants me to depend on him, so he asks before I am confident in myself. Doing God's will involves faith on my part as God stretches me for my sanctification. The same is true for all his people. "And without faith it is impossible to please [God]" (Hebrews 11:6). Trusting God's providence means believing he knows what is ahead and will provide grace for the place (Proverbs 16:9). As I submit to God through prayer, he will make it clear. You may ask yourself these same questions when seeking God's will in specific situations you encounter.

Faith in God's Providence Produces Joy as I See Life Unfold under God's Direction

Being diagnosed with cancer was not "bad luck" or chance. Hard times became opportunities to grow in trusting God and seeing his goodness. My desire to be a mathematics teacher was also part of God's providence. The logical, orderly thought processes I learned have been invaluable in teaching the Bible and training teachers. Teaching mathematics was only for a season. Yet nothing is ever wasted in God's economy. What past

experiences have prepared you for your current situation? How might God use them to help you know him in a deeper way?

Faith in God's Providence Strengthens Me for Criticism and Interruptions

Jesus loved his enemies and prayed for those who persecuted him. He asked God to forgive them as he was being nailed to the cross. I must do the same if I am to be like Jesus. Faith in his providence strengthens me for a Christlike attitude toward life even with criticism, interruptions, and oppression. I am to be kind and compassionate, forgiving others as God in Christ forgave me (Ephesians 4:32). I am to love them and pray for them. This calling is not unique to me; the same is true for every Christian.

God is not surprised by interruptions to my daily planner. He is sovereign over my time and may make up my lost time if I am able to return to my planned activities. However, it is up to God whether I ever resume my planned activities or whether he makes up my lost time in another way. He has something for me in each interruption that is for my good even though I may not see it in the moment. Everything is profitable toward my sanctification or the eternal good of others. Have you acknowledged that your time belongs to God and he is free to use it however he pleases? If you are in Christ, you belong to him, which means all you are and have are his, including the minutes of your day.

I am not to live according to the worldview set forth in music, TV, news, sitcoms, and movies. I am Christ's and I am to live in a way that embraces his purposes for me within his overarching plan of redeeming a people for himself. I am to be faithful to my calling in Christ. I am reminded of this each day when I read a small plaque on my wall I brought from the

home of my aunt when she died. I had seen it there from my early childhood.

Only one life,
 'Twill soon be past,
 Only what's done
 For Christ will last.
 "For me to live is Christ."

What worldview determines your activities, pursuits, and pleasures? Does your worldview begin with God or does it begin with you? Which of your activities, pursuits, and pleasures would please God? Do they describe one who says, like Paul, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21)?

Faith in God's Providence Produces Hope in the Face of Disaster and Death

God has ordained the days laid out for each of us. Every day of our lives was planned before we were born (Psalm 139:16). The same truth is valid for our loved ones. My mother died at age fifty, two weeks after I was engaged to be married. I missed her presence as I planned and celebrated my wedding. Nevertheless, I was able to trust God's providence in the timing of her death. For Christians, the end of life on earth is merely the entrance into life in the presence of God.

God both lifts up and tears down for his glory and our eternal good (Lamentations 3:37–38). What comfort this brings when faced with a despotic ruler and potential persecution by terrorist groups! Knowing God is in control provides an antidote to the fear and frustration that characterize our culture. It also provides hope in the face of legislation that violates God's

Word. Are you comforted by God's providence as you read or listen to the world news?

My friends John and Debra believe God is sovereign over all things and that he is always good. They can quote Romans 8:28–29, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” One day, Debra was called to put her faith into action.

I stopped and parked at a roadside rest stop on the way home from a drive with my three children—Marshall (5), Lucy (3), and Bowen (19 months). I remember parking in a parking spot, turning off the ignition, and walking around to the passenger side of our minivan to make a diaper change. After the diaper was on, I said, “It’s time to buckle up; it’s not safe to be on the side of the road when your seat belt is not buckled.”

These next few events were all happening at the same time: Bowen was buckled up; Lucy, in the far rear passenger side, and Marshall, on the back driver’s side, had not yet clicked their seat belts. My feet were on the ground while I reached to buckle Lucy. All of a sudden, I remember hearing a crash and feeling the van move as we were T-boned by a four-door pickup truck traveling 70 mph! I remember my shoes flying off and my legs feeling like flapping rag dolls. When the van stopped, I had been flung to the edge of the middle row looking toward the front of Bowen, who was still in his car seat. I could not find Lucy! I was unable to stand because of the laceration in my left leg, broken knee, and

pretzel-like position of my legs. There was blood everywhere, the boys were screaming and crying, and I could not find Lucy! I kept calling out, "I have three children! Where is my daughter? God, you are still good, but where is my daughter?" I cried out over and over. I do not know how much time passed. It seemed to stand still.

The first responders were an off-duty fireman and a nurse. The fireman immediately put a tourniquet on my leg because there was so much blood everywhere. The nurse assured me she had called 911, and I gave her my husband's cell phone number, name, and place of employment. I kept repeating, "I have three children. I cannot find my daughter! I have three children. I cannot find my daughter!"

As the fireman finished tying a second tourniquet on my leg, the truck driver that hit us came around, hugged me, and said, "I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!" I was in excruciating pain, and I remember saying, "Stop! Please stop hugging me! You're hurting me; my chest hurts!" I believe it was the nurse who walked him away from me toward the back end of the car.

Then Lucy stood up from under the front bumper of the man's truck, which was now inside our van, nearly touching the seat in which Bowen was still buckled! Lucy was crying hysterically but was alive! Glass was everywhere, and all three children were crying. I kept thanking God for saving our lives.

The ambulance staff and state trooper put the children on stretchers with neck braces in two different ambulances to go to the emergency room. Trusting the medics to take my two boys to the hospital—since I was strapped to a stretcher in a different ambulance—was the second hardest part of this

event. Lucy was still very upset and crying. We were holding hands across the ambulance. I said, "Lucy, you like to sing. Can you sing us a song?" She began to sing "Jesus Loves Me" and stopped crying. Now the medics and I were crying. Mine were tears of joy.

Our precious pastor was waiting at the ER. His familiar face and calm, tender heart were just what the children needed. My husband arrived within moments.

This whole event has allowed powerful and meaningful conversations with my children. It has been an amazing lesson in trusting God's sovereignty, being thankful for his provision, and learning the depth of the word *forgiveness*. We forgive because he has forgiven us. Marshall, with tears in his eyes, asked, "But how do we forgive that man?" My reply to him was, "It's only the power of the Holy Spirit that allows us to do that! Without Christ, we would be in the same position as the man that was drunk behind the wheel and hit us. We would be sinning too."

Provisionally, John and Debra had been teaching their children truth about God and were living it before this accident occurred. Lucy knew to sing about Jesus' love for her in this time of extreme chaos and confusion. They continued to trust God even in the midst of the agony of the moment. Their children saw them crying out to God and forgiving one who had caused them such trauma and pain. John and Debra were prepared to use this catastrophe as a platform to teach their children the gospel and to demonstrate forgiveness and trust in God's providence. Two years later, God continues to show his protective hand in their physical healing, financial settlements, and peace of mind.

What Next?

What will you do with the book of Esther? As you begin, read it several times to meet the characters and enjoy the story line. Get caught up in watching the drama unfold, lamenting over the villain, and cheering for God's people. Rejoice in the split-second timing that reveals God's providence without mentioning his name. Later lessons will focus on the details of the narrative. Read the words of the hymn each day and search for phrases that help you understand God's providence in the Scripture being studied.

Esther is not just the story of a woman who was used by God. It is the revelation of God's providence in the historical account of her life, her people, and all those in every age.

What truths about God's providence can you expect to find in this study?

- God's chief end is to display his glory. Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Glorifying God is not just worshiping him or doing what pleases him. It is being pleased with who God is and what God does. We cannot worship whom we do not enjoy. We cannot enjoy God if we are vying for his sovereign control over our lives.
- God has a plan and infallibly and sovereignly works to accomplish it. Where is your "free will" in this picture? Your will is free to do only what it desires. For all of us, our desires follow those of Adam and Eve in the garden until we are in Christ. In Christ, your desires are made new and your will is joyfully submitted to God's will (Philippians 2:13).
- His providence guarantees his purpose will happen as he planned.

- God ordains and controls each and every event. He is more than an observer; he is the initiator and governor. Does this mean that God ordains evil? Yes, it does. God is not evil, but he ordains it and uses evil people to accomplish his greater good, our holiness. It was God who sent Jesus to die on the cross to provide salvation for his sinful people (Acts 2:23). It was God who gave Paul a thorn in his flesh that he might prove God's grace was sufficient for his every need (2 Corinthians 12:9).
- God has a purpose and plan in everything that happens to each of us for his glory as well as our present welfare and eternal good.

Will you embrace these truths and strive to understand God's providence? Will you accept whatever God gives, believing he is sovereign over all events? This includes times of plenty and times of relatively less. It includes want and hardship. When we trust God's providence, we are at peace with it and enjoying it. Even more, we are at peace with God and enjoying God.

Closing Prayer

Gracious and providential God, you have provided the book of Esther at this time in my life. Surely this is no accident but one of the predetermined details in your plan and purpose for me. Please open my eyes to see your providence in the lives of each of the characters individually and collectively. Give me understanding of your providence in my life in the past, and help me see it in the days ahead. Then give me a heart to embrace your providence as it is—perfect, as you are. For your honor and glory. Amen.

HAS GOD EVER SEEMED DISTANT FROM ISSUES
AND EVENTS THAT DEEPLY IMPACT YOU?
HAS HE REALLY INTENDED FOR CERTAIN
THINGS TO HAPPEN?

The book of Esther never mentions God, yet it gives us fascinating insight into his unerring work to rescue his people. Using commentary, application questions, testimonies, and hymns, Jane Roach walks us through the book's compelling historical narrative and helps us to identify and learn from God's providential activity.

See God's hand in your own circumstances, lean on him, and experience a new life of gratitude, peace, and joy.

“God's sovereignty and providential care over all things is one of the most important and foundational doctrines of our faith. . . . This theologically rich study takes us through the pages of God's Word to see that all God's purposes come to pass.”

Christina Fox, Author, *A Heart Set Free*

“Jane Roach's insightful study-and-discussion questions and clear exposition blend serious engagement with the scriptural text with a focus on Christ, our true Rescuer. . . . It will move you to worship the Lord in awe at all times and to rest in his sovereign wisdom and love in times of trial.”

Dennis E. Johnson, Author, *Walking with Jesus through His Word*

“This resource will be a tremendous aid to personal worship and devotional study, as well as for small group discussions. Discover God's providence in Esther and you will learn to see God's presence in your own life.”

Richard D. Phillips, Senior Minister, Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville

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P U B L I S H I N G
www.prpbooks.com

BIBLE STUDY / OLD TESTAMENT
ISBN: 978-1-62995-224-6

