

Providence, by John Piper. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020. 752 pp. \$39.99.

John Piper, founder and lead teacher of desiringGod.org and chancellor of Bethlehem College and Seminary, served for thirty-three years as the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He has written more than fifty books. Other books treating providence recently published include Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders, eds., *Divine Action and Providence* (Zondervan, 2019), and Mark W. Elliott. *Providence: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Account* (Baker, 2020). Both books treat the complexities of providence, and in some respects, complement the work under review which focuses on providence in salvation history and theological synthesis.

Although the word *providence* is not found in most translations of the Bible, it is an all-inclusive concept that Piper seeks to explore. Simply put, providence is purposeful sovereignty. The author summarizes the impact of providence: “From Genesis to Revelation, the providence of God directs the entire course of human history” (inside cover). Piper divides the book into three main sections. In section one he presents his working definition of providence and discusses the difficulty of the topic; the second section focuses on the goal of providence in the history of Israel; finally, Piper treats the nature and extent of providence.

The book’s aim is not to speculate about what we cannot know about providence. Rather “immersing ourselves in the ocean of his [God’s] providence is meant to help us know him, fear him, trust him, and love him as we ought” (15). We also respond to God’s providence in our obedience, less so our speculation. Critically, “we are obliged to follow his revealed precepts, not his secret purposes” (25). But God’s providence focuses on our care. Reflecting on Jesus’s oft-cited statement about God’s tender treatment of small birds, Piper observes, “He [Jesus] really believes that God’s hand is at work in the smallest details of natural processes” (18). He concludes: “That kind of pervasive providence, combined with that kind of fatherly care, means he can and will take care of you” (19). Here we may recognize an allusion to God’s care for Joseph through good intentions as compared to his brothers’ intentions to harm him. Joseph’s oft-quoted statement about God’s and sinful human intentions leads into his words of consolation, “God will surely take care of you” (Gen 50:24–25).

One cannot imagine John Piper writing a book about providence that did not have in view God’s glory and our praise. It is within the framework of providence that Piper offers a persuasive explanation of how God’s self-exaltation is not like our arrogant versions of the same. God’s aim is less self-promotion and more “the pursuit of sharing the greatest pleasure possible” (42). But why address this in a study of providence? Piper answers the question: “Because, when we turn to the question of God’s final goal in providence, we find in scripture that his own glory—the beauty of the full panorama of his perfections—is God’s most recurring and all-embracing aim” (43).

Some argue God not only has a right to such claims, he deserves the glory that he receives. This is true. But it misses the author's point: The expression "'for his glory' does not mean to *get* glory which he doesn't already have, but rather to display and vindicate and communicate his glory for the everlasting enjoyment of his people—that is, for all of those who, instead of resenting God's self-exaltation, receive him as their supreme treasure" (43).

The apostle Paul's words, "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (Eph 1:6, see 12 and 14 which leave out "of his grace") captures the essence of this discussion: "God's goal is not simply that the glory of his perfection shine, but that we find God's glory *praiseworthy*" (53). To be specific, we feel it and enjoy it resulting in praise. The author says, "My hope is that every reader will see that God's God-centeredness—God's commitment to magnify his name, his holiness, and his glory as the ultimate aim of his providence—is not a threat to our joy but the basis of it" (150). This is how "providence penetrates the heart and performs what it commands" (157).

But providence also entails God's plan to permit. I quote John Piper at length: "I choose those words carefully: 'planned to permit.' Sometimes we say God permitted something. This is perfectly fitting, 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.... But what we sometimes overlook is that, since God foresees what he may or may not permit, he chooses whether to permit or not.... He chooses in view of all the consequences (painful and pleasant) that will flow from whatever he permits. Therefore, we may speak properly of what he *planned* to permit. And thus we may, and should speak of God's *purpose* in permitting" (175–76). From this, we may gather that God, in his providence, plans to permit certain consequences. This is a mystery that God leaves us to accept. But we see it in action with God's agency and sending.

Providence, purposeful sovereignty, plays a crucial role in passages of Scripture which describe God's sending or missions. Is God any less providential working through agents? The question is significant because sending and mission is evident in Piper's thinking from the book's dedication about sending missionaries to the "advance of God's mission in the world" (33), and finally, to the book's subject index listing "sending providence" (723).

Here, I believe the author breaks new ground in the fertile soil of agency. Piper cogently states, "Joseph's remark about God's intention is one of the most important statements on the providence of God in the Bible" (426). Addressing God's sending Joseph to Egypt as his agent to preserve Israel in Egypt (Gen 45:4–8), the author explains, "God planned and willed that their evil act come to pass. Yet in all of this, God did not sin or in any way defile his perfect holiness or diminish his perfect goodness" (429). Is there something about sending and agency that offers insight into God's providence?

God accomplishes his "purposeful sovereignty" through sending.

Sending entails the *words of God* in messages of various sorts as well as the *works of God*, all through agents on mission. God is the King of all creation; therefore, he administers both directly and through agency. But God working through agency may sound weaker than his direct action. Maybe it does not sound like the same kind or degree of causality. But are these two forms of providential acts so different? Is God any less providential working through agency? Certainly, both are purposeful. If God's providence includes natural possesses as Piper argues, then human, angelic, or other forms of agency may be equally providential.

Crucially, Joseph is God's agent on mission in the narrative. Neither God nor Joseph ever explain the wonder of God's "sending providence," to use Piper's terms. Joseph says to his brothers, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, *for God sent me before you to preserve life*" (Gen 45:4–5). Does this earlier verse clarify what Joseph means when he says, "you meant it for evil but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20)? For this reason, the author can say in summary: "In spite of real human agency at almost every turn, God is treated as the one who brings Israel's history to pass. Therefore we can speak of a purpose of God's providence in Israel's history" (77), whether through human or other agency and mission.

The book's 725 pages including appendices, might seem daunting, but the author's pastoral, often sermonic style makes the book very readable. Providence is a challenging topic. But the author makes the topic accessible for those willing to read and think carefully. This reader highly recommends the book to those who want to wrestle with the certainties as well as the mysteries of God's providence.

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The Trinity and the Bible: On Theological Interpretation, by Scott R. Swain. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021. 131 pp. \$19.99.

Over the past decade and a half, Scott Swain has contributed fruitfully on both an academic and a popular level to the ongoing renaissance of Trinitarian studies. Prior to this recovery, Swain likens the hermeneutical condition of Trinitarian studies to a brain injury in which the patient is able to recognize features but not faces. Features of Trinitarian orthodoxy continued to be affirmed but without the categories and interpretive practices in which they made sense. This collection of essays seeks to do its part toward a cure for this disease.

The five essays which make up the heart of this book are not new; all were published elsewhere over the course of the past several years. Hence, each essay stands on its own. A list of their titles will give the reader a sense of the territory they cover. Chapter 2 is "The Bible and