



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Providence

Reverend Scott Johnson | August 30, 2026 | Acts 17:22-34

Old Testament Reading

Our Old Testament reading is Genesis chapter 50, verses 15 through 21. And in this passage, we hear the words that Joseph spoke to his brothers after they had been reunited and after his brothers had dealt so treacherously with Joseph, and he suffered so much as a result of that. Joseph is able to look back and to see that God had a good purpose even in all that they had done to him. So let's hear God's Word.

This is the infallible and inerrant Word of our God. Genesis 50, verses 15 through 21.

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph saying, "Your father gave this command before he died, 'Say to Joseph, please forgive the transgressions of your brothers and their sin because they did evil to you.' And now please forgive the transgressions of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today. So do not fear. I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

New Testament Reading

And now let's turn to the New Testament for our New Testament reading, and this is also our sermon text for today. Acts chapter 17, verses 22 through 34. Acts 17, verses 22 through 34. This is Paul's speech or his sermon before the Areopagus in Athens.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown God.' What therefore you worship as

unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'in him we live and move and have our being,' as even some of your own poets have said, 'for we are indeed his offspring.'

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine image is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed. And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from their midst, but some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Introduction: Finding God's Rule in Disasters

Well, I know all of us are very grateful that the fires that were so threatening just over a week ago, that they have been brought under control. So we give thanks to God for that. And we are also very grateful to God that the fires were not as devastating as they could have been.

Some of us had to evacuate our homes, but no one in our church family suffered from the loss of our houses or significant property. For our family, our biggest loss was we had to throw out some spoiled food in the fridge. So not bad at all.

But we know that there were some in our community who did suffer much loss. From what I understand, there were several injuries. And I read yesterday that sadly one person did die from their injuries from the fire, and there were several dozen homes that were destroyed in the fire. And of course, that would be a devastating thing to suffer.

As Christians, as we experience a disaster like this, of course, the first thing to do, the best thing to do is to weep with those who weep, to show the compassion of Christ to those who have suffered loss, as God gives us opportunity to help those in need. At the same time, as Christians, we are called to think biblically about these kinds of events. How do we understand a sudden disaster or tragedy in the purposes of God? Why does He permit these things to happen?

Which raises a more general question: how do we understand the rule of God over us in our day-to-day lives, or God's rule in this world? Well, these are the questions I want to address today with you, and we'll do so by focusing on the teaching of what is called the providence of God, the providence of God.

Defining the Providence of God

So first of all, what is God's providence? Well, to put it most simply, the providence of God is the truth that God exercises sovereign rule over all his creation. There is nothing that takes place in this world, whether it is good or evil, there is nothing that takes place that is outside the absolute control, power, authority, and rule of God, the Creator and Lord of all.

One of the best definitions of providence is found in our Shorter Catechism, the Westminster Shorter Catechism. What are God's works of providence? This is number 11. God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful, preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions. And God preserves and governs all his creatures and all their actions according to his eternal decree that he has set before the foundation of the world that he made in eternity, that decree that all things will take place exactly as they do in fact take place.

God has decreed all things to unfold in the course of the history of creation, just as they do. And this encompasses everything. God's decree is over all things, from the movements of galaxies, from the courses of the tiniest subatomic particles. God's decree encompasses all the affairs of this world; it also includes all the circumstances of your life in this world.

Now, God does establish and work through secondary causes and means. However, at the end of the day, when all is said and done, we can say this: that God unfailingly brings to pass, he infallibly brings to pass all that he has determined in eternity. And His providence is His rule over all of creation to bring about that eternal purpose that He has set for His creatures.

And so, what that means is that there is nothing in this world that takes God by surprise. God is not shocked. He is not surprised. He is not taken aback by anything that happens in this world. There is nothing that happens that is contrary or opposed to his sovereign will in governing his creation.

Now, does that mean that God is responsible for the evil that is in the world? No. God is not the author of evil. He is not the originator of evil and sin. He cannot be. He is holy. He is pure. He is righteous. Sin and evil are absolutely contrary to all that God is and his righteousness as God.

However, it does mean that even sin and evil, however mysterious their origins may be, they are under His absolute power and rule. And in a way that is far beyond our comprehension, He uses even sin and evil to further His own holy, His wise, His good purposes for His creation. And what all this means for you personally is that your life is not ruled by chance, by fate, by destiny, but it is God, the God who created you, who gives you life. It is God who personally superintends and governs and controls every circumstance of your life, from the life-changing events down to the tiniest details.

The Biblical Witness to God's Sovereign Rule

This may surprise you, but the word providence is not actually found in the Bible. If you read the King James Bible, there is one instance where the word providence is used, but it actually refers to the rule of man, not the rule of God. But providence, like the word trinity, although it is a word that is not found in the scripture, the truth of it, all that it signifies is most certainly taught in the scripture.

So providence is biblical. And there are many, many passages of the Bible that we could go to to see where this truth is made very plain, that God is the one who rules over all things. For example, we read this in Nehemiah 9, verse 6: "You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens with all their hosts, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them, and you preserve all of them. And the host of heaven worships you." It is God who preserves all his creation.

Psalms 119, verse 91: "By your appointment, they stand to this day, for all things are your servants." All things, even the actions of those who do evil, all things are God's servants, and He uses them for good.

Ephesians 1:11, speaking of God, of course: "He works all things according to the counsel of His will."

And so there we can multiply Bible verses and passages that show us this truth of the providence of God. But today I've chosen this sermon by the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts to teach us some lessons about the providence of God.

Paul's Context and Audience in Athens

First, we'll look at the background to Paul's speech. And as we do, as we look at the speech after that, we'll follow the logic of what he says as he makes his appeal to the Athenians.

If we read earlier in Acts, we would see that Paul was sent to Athens for his own safety. If you remember, he was in Berea where he was preaching the gospel, but because of the opposition that was stirred up there by the enemies of the gospel, Paul was whisked out of the city for his own safety. And so he was taken to Athens, and he was waiting in Athens to be reunited with his fellow missionaries, Silas and Timothy.

Now, Paul was not the kind of person when he had some unplanned free time to just relax. He's not the kind of person who would go to the beach and read a book and just wait for his friends to show up. But rather, in Athens, Paul devoted himself to doing what he did everywhere he went, and that is he preached the gospel. He preached the gospel to the Jews in the synagogue. He preached the gospel to the Gentiles in the marketplace.

And when he preached to the Gentiles in the marketplace, his preaching there created something of a stir. Some of the philosophers, we are told, were interested, at least interested

enough to talk to Paul about what he was preaching. But other people dismissed him. They brushed him off. They called him a babbler. Verse 18: "What does this babbler wish to say?"

But some at least understood that Paul had a serious message to communicate and so they wanted to hear more. And so they took him and they brought him to the Areopagus. The Areopagus is actually a couple of things. First of all, it's the name of a hill in Athens, a rock-covered hill. It's also known as Mars Hill. But the Areopagus was also the name that was given to the judicial court of Athens that was charged with governing the moral, the religious affairs of the city. And so it was a kind of court.

Paul wasn't on trial. He wasn't charged with any criminal activity. Rather, he was taken to the Areopagus, this court, so that they could inquire more fully about his preaching. They wanted to hear more about what he had to say. And this curiosity on the part of the Athenians about Paul's preaching was not necessarily a sign that they were ready to believe his message about Christ and the resurrection. But they were curious to hear more from Paul because, as Luke says it in verse 21, he says, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new."

I've often thought that that's a very fitting description for the internet. What is the internet but a gigantic forum for hearing or seeing or telling something new? Well, the Greeks didn't have the internet, but they did have Athens, and there they could hear something new. And with the preaching of Paul, they definitely heard something that they had not heard before. And that is the message of the resurrection of a man named Jesus. And they wanted to hear more about this strange teaching from this Jew who was preaching the resurrection of Christ.

Paul's Speech Before the Areopagus

Now, Athens was a city that was famous for its religious devotion. And of course, by religious, we mean pagan religions. There were the Jews who lived there. Of course, they worshiped the true God in the synagogue. But for all of the Gentiles, for the pagans who lived in Athens, they had all kinds of gods. The gods that they worshiped were virtually beyond number. One writer said at the time that in Athens, it is easier to find a god than a man.

And as Paul began his sermon to the Areopagus, he speaks about one altar in particular that caught his attention as he was noticing all of the altars to all the various gods in the city. It was an altar with the inscription: "To the unknown God." Whatever the original intention may have been of the person or the people who set up that altar and inscribed those words on the altar, the Apostle Paul took it as evidence that the Athenians, despite all of the philosophies that they professed, despite all of the gods that they worshiped, that at some deep level in their hearts, they recognized that there was one true God.

We know this is what Paul understood because this is what Paul has told us in his letter to the Romans in Romans chapter 1. Paul says that God has made himself known to all people everywhere in the things that he has made. And so Paul knew that the Athenians had received from creation a certain knowledge, a true knowledge of the true God. However, just as all

people do everywhere, the Athenians also suppressed that knowledge of God in unrighteousness. And so, although they did in fact receive the revelation of God through his creation, they didn't truly know God because they suppressed that truth of him in their hearts. And yet in this altar that they made to the, quote, "unknown God," they bore a kind of indirect, unwitting witness to the very truth about God that they perceived at one level, and yet they rejected at a more conscious level.

And so their altar to the unknown God was a kind of testimony on their parts, even if it was an unconscious testimony to the existence of the true God, the creator and Lord of heaven and earth. And so accordingly, the apostle Paul begins his speech to the Athenians by saying in verse 23, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."

And you'll notice in what he does in this sermon, Paul does not once quote the scriptures. And the reason for that is obvious: because he is preaching to Gentiles who did not know the scriptures. But rather, of course, everything that Paul said to the Athenians was scriptural, biblical. However, he just didn't quote the scriptures.

However, the Apostle Paul appeals to something that the Athenians could recognize if they were willing to admit it. And that is, he appeals to the providence of God. And so he says in verses 24 and 25, he says, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, he does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything."

And so Paul tells the Athenians that the true God, the living God, the one who is both the creator and the one who upholds and sustains human life, that he is the God that they have given witness to in this unwitting way, to the unknown God. And what a difference between this God and the pagan gods, the false gods, the idols that they worshiped. The pagan gods all over Athens, they were confined to their temples. They needed the help of man to keep them alive. And so the Athenians made them temples to house them, they gave them food offerings to feed them.

But Paul declares the truth about the one true God, that there is no temple in all of creation, no matter how big, that could possibly contain this God. And so far is he from needing the service of men to sustain his life, that he is the one that gives life and breath to all mankind, as he says in verse 25. And so Paul appeals to the providence of God. He's telling the Athenians: You have been provided food and air and life. It is God who gives that to you.

And Paul continues to speak about the providence of God. He says in verse 26, this means that all people on earth come from Adam. All of us were made from Adam. We speak of different races among people, but biblically, theologically, there is just one race. It is the human race, and we are equally members of it.

Paul goes on to say that God is the one who has determined the times and the places in which all people have dwelt. In verse 26: "having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place." Here again, Paul is declaring God's providence: that it is God who has

placed all people, and this is true for you and me, He has placed us exactly in the time and the place where it was His will for us to live in this world.

Oh, there are so many more details that we could look at in this sermon, but since we're focusing on the providence of God, we'll have to skip some of the details, though they are very fascinating. But instead, you'll notice that Paul ends his sermon by calling the Athenians to repentance. He says that God has been merciful to them. He has overlooked their ignorance, but now that he has raised up Jesus from the dead, and in light of the judgment that is to come upon all people, Paul tells the Athenians they must repent. They must repent of their unbelief, their idolatry. They must put their trust and hope in the Son of God, the resurrected Jesus Christ for their salvation.

So this was an evangelistic message. Some rejected it. Some put their faith in Christ. But Paul's primary appeal in this message was to the providence of God. And if, by the grace of God, the Athenians could see it, they would acknowledge that, yes, as even their own poets have testified, it is this God, the creator, whom they have called the unknown God, it is in him that they live and move and have their being.

Living Under God's Providence: Gratitude and Hope

And everything that Paul told the Athenians then is true for you and me today as well. How is it that you continue to enjoy life in this world day by day? Well, it is God who gives you life and breath and everything. Every meal you eat, every breath you take, every morning that you wake up in this world is God's gift to you.

Why do you live where you live? Why do you live now at this time and not some other time? It is because God in his providence has placed you exactly in the place where he willed you to be.

And we can expand on those kinds of questions. Why are all the particular circumstances in your life what they are? Well, it's not chance or fortune or bad luck, but God has determined all the circumstances of your life so they are what they are by the will of God.

We could go even deeper than that. Why do you even exist in the first place? Why do you continue to exist from day to day, from moment to moment? Why do we not all suddenly evaporate, evaporate in a moment of time and become nothing? Well, it's not because we are upheld by our own power, it's not because we are sustained and upheld by some impersonal laws of nature, but it's because in God and in God alone, we live and move and have our being. Our very existence, our moment-to-moment existence is dependent upon the power and the rule of God over us.

Like the Athenians, all of us live under the providence of God, and this truth of God's providence means at least two things for you and me. First of all, it means that we must look back on the past with gratitude, and secondly, we must look ahead to the future with hope.

Looking Back on the Past with Gratitude

So first, we need to look back on the past with gratitude. In the present, as we're going through the present, as we're experiencing life moment to moment, we don't always see the hand of God at work in the events of our lives. But often with hindsight, we can look back and see how God intervened in our lives in ways that were for our good.

Perhaps you can think of times in your life in which the Lord blessed you in a particular way, in a special way, a remarkable way. Or perhaps you can think of a time when God gave you a certain provision that exactly met the need that you had at that time. And for those blessings of God, you must give thanks, because it is through these provisions of his providence that he shows his fatherly care, his love, his concern for us in this life. And so there are times when the hand of God is very evident, and with hindsight, we can see exactly how God in his providence gave us what we needed at the right time, or perhaps he saved us from some trouble in some remarkable way.

But God's providence is also evident in the very ordinary events of our lives as well. His sovereign hand is behind all the non-spectacular, ordinary blessings that you and I have received. And these blessings also are a cause for thanksgiving. Do you enjoy good health? Have you been provided for? Has God kept you safe? These are gifts of God's grace for which we must give thanks.

There's a story told about one of the early presidents of Princeton College, a man by the name of John Witherspoon. And if you're a history buff, that name will ring a bell for you. John Witherspoon was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. In fact, he was the only active clergyman who signed the Declaration. But there's a story told about him that goes like this:

An acquaintance of Witherspoon said to him, "Dr. Witherspoon, help me to thank God for his wonderful providence. My horse ran away, my buggy was dashed to pieces on the rocks, and behold, I am unharmed."

Witherspoon replied, "Why, I know a providence a thousand times better than that of yours. I have driven down that rocky road to Princeton hundreds of times, and my horse never ran away, and my buggy was never dashed to pieces."

And that's true of our lives as well. Every day that you have health, every day that you are kept free from harm, every day that God gives you your daily bread, this also is a testimony to the wonderful providence of God.

I was reflecting on the fires last week and I thought about, so I was thinking about the sermon as well. Our family, we've been here in Reno for six, about six and a half years now. And on only two of the days that we have lived in Reno, we've had to evacuate our house because of the threat of harm. But all of the thousands of other days that we've lived here, we've been kept perfectly safe. And why is that? It's because of the gracious providence of God.

We give God thanks for the way he kept us safe from the threat of fire, but we also give thanks, or we ought to give thanks, for the way that God keeps us safe, even in the ordinary times, when there is no obvious threat. That is still God's care for us.

As a believer in Jesus Christ, you can say this about yourself: Everything that has taken place in your life, every event, every experience, even the suffering that you have endured, this has taken place under the gracious rule of a Heavenly Father who loves you and who uses all things for your good, for your salvation.

And this raises the question: Are you grateful? Are you thankful to God for his goodness to you, the way that he has dealt with you in his providence, doing you good? Do you thank him for every temporal and spiritual blessing that he's given you in Christ? Can you thank Him even as you think back on the hard times, the struggles and the suffering that you have endured? Can you thank Him even in those circumstances as well?

If you believe that God is sovereign over you and that He has a good and wise and loving purpose for you in all the circumstances of your life, then you can give thanks to Him in all the circumstances of your life. And so we can look back and give thanks to God for His goodness to us and His providence.

Looking Forward to the Future with Hope

We can also look forward with hope. And that's because the promise of God is the same for the future as well. He promises that he will rule over all things in our lives for our good.

There may be some things for you on the horizon that are filling you with apprehension, with dread. Maybe it's a family matter, a very difficult relational matter. Perhaps it's an employment issue or perhaps a serious health concern, or financial concern, or maybe you're just anxious because the future is always uncertain, and that uncertainty of the future just fills you with anxiety. Well, whatever it may be, you can be assured that no matter what takes place tomorrow or the next day or the next day, either it will be good in itself and an obvious blessing, or God will use it for your good, and it will be a blessing that comes to you in the form of something that is difficult. And so you always have the promise that God will continue to work out His gracious, loving purposes for you in the future.

Responding to Life's Interruptions and Hardships

On a very practical level, there is, when it comes to thinking about the providence of God, a challenge that all of us face as we seek to be faithful to God, as we seek to be faithful to Him in this world that is full of unknowns and uncertainties. And that is, how do we respond to the interruptions that come into our lives?

If you're like me, you like to plan, you like to have a fairly set idea in your mind of what the day is going to look like, what the week is going to look like. But then the inevitable interruption comes and it ruins all your plans and you get frustrated. However, that's not the right way to look at

these interruptions. Interruptions are nothing other than God's reminders to us that he is the one who plans our lives, not us. And our frustration in the face of interruptions is really nothing else than our failure to remember that it is God, not us. It is God who is the Lord of our lives.

I think C.S. Lewis had some very wise words to say about this. C.S. Lewis wrote this, he said, "The great thing, the great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's," quote, "own," or, quote, "real life. The truth is, of course, that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life, the life God is sending one day by day. What one calls one's," quote, "real life is a phantom of one's own imagination."

In other words, the life that God actually gives us, even with all of its unexpected interruptions and changes to our plans, this is the life that God has given us to live, not the one that we have fancied and imagined for ourselves.

But what about the major disruptions, the hardships that come to you? You suffer an injury or sickness that upends your life. You lose a loved one, you lose a job, or your career takes a very sudden and bad turn. Well, the same truth applies to all these major events that turn your life upside down. They come to you not by chance, not by fate, but by the providence of God, and they are used by God for your blessing, for your good.

And the providence of God extends to what we call natural disasters. This past week, we heard about the terrible flash flooding in Nepal. Apparently it was caused by a glacier that had broken up and loosed a ton of water that came flooding into villages and hundreds of people, perhaps, probably thousands of people have been killed. Well, why does God allow something like that to take place in his providence? What is the good that he brings from that?

We don't know. We don't know. We can't answer the specific questions. Why this specific thing? Why did God allow this tragedy to happen? Why did He allow all of these hundreds and thousands of people to die suddenly? We don't know. But we do know that God is infinitely good, that He is infinitely wise, and that in His rule over all things, in His providence over this world, even in these disasters and calamities, He has something that is good that He will bring from it. He has a holy and wise and good purpose for it.

God's Sovereignty Over Sin and the Ultimate Good

And this providence of God even extends to the evil that people do to one another. God uses even the evil and the sin of men for good.

That was Joseph's testimony after he suffered injustice after injustice because of the treachery, the betrayal of his brothers who sold him into slavery. Joseph could look back on that, that experience, that time that was filled with all kinds of hardship for him. He could say, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as it is this day."

Some of you may have suffered tremendous heartache and pain and grief because of the ways that other people have sinned against you, the ways that other people have abused you. Well, know that you have in Jesus Christ a compassionate Savior. You have a Savior who knows what it is like to suffer the sin and the evil that is inflicted on Him by the hands of men. But you can also say the same thing as Joseph: They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

And nowhere is the sovereign rule of God in bringing good out of evil more apparent than it is in the cross of Jesus Christ. Peter says these remarkable words in Acts chapter 2. As he's preaching the resurrection of Christ, he says, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

And so Paul says to the Jews in Jerusalem, you were lawless, you were sinning, you were wicked, you crucified the Son of God. But before that, he says, it was all according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. And so God, in his sovereign rule over all things, he determines, he planned for the most wicked, the most heinous crime that would ever be committed, the crucifixion of the righteous and holy son of God. But he did this so that sinners such as you and me might have our sins forgiven, that we might receive the gift of eternal life.

It was God's purpose to give him over to lawless men so that he would suffer that judgment that belonged to you and me for our sin, for our guilt. And if your trust is in Jesus Christ, then know that Jesus took your sin and guilt and he bore it at the cross so that you could be forgiven. And so we look back and we can see that even in that most awful event where Jesus Christ was betrayed by Judas, where He was demanded to be crucified by His own people, where lawless men nailed him to the cross, even over that, God was carrying out His perfectly wise and holy and loving purposes.

If you could trust that He was provident in that and doing good in that, then you can trust the same God in His rule over all the circumstances of your life for your eternal good, no matter how painful they may be, no matter how sad they may be, what you experience and suffer in this life, God promises out of His love for you that He will use it to bless you, to do you good. And that blessing and that good will extend for all eternity.

Conclusion

I'll end by quoting this wonderful description of God's providence. This is from the Heidelberg Catechism. This is a question, I forget the question and answer, but this is the answer to what is God's providence, and we'll end with this.

Providence is the almighty and ever-present power of God, by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty, all things in fact, come to us not by chance, but from his fatherly hand.

Let's pray.