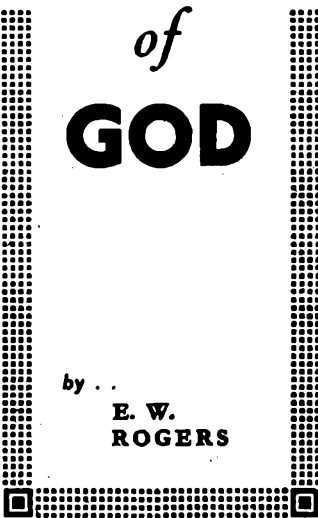


The
PROVIDENCE
and
SILENCE
of
GOD



by . .

**E. W.
ROGERS**

The Providence and Silence of God.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD.

AMONG the mysteries of life the Silence of God, on the one hand, and the Providence of God on the other, each holds its place. They are not contradictory the one of the other. The Silence of God has to do with the apparent absence of His direct interference in human affairs; the Providence of God has to do with His superintending control of such affairs.

The word 'providence' etymologically implies foreseeing; and, as a result, the taking of such measures as are necessary to 'provide' against the foreseen emergency. In that sense the word is used in Gen. 22. 8. God foresaw that Isaac would be in need of a substitute if his life was to be spared, and He took appropriate measures to provide accordingly; therefore the ram caught by its horns in the thicket was ready to hand.

The providence of God is operative through inanimate and animate things: through things voluntary and things involuntary: through good and through evil. It causes all things so to inter-act one upon another that they issue ultimately for the accomplishment of the Divine purpose and the good of the creature.

The providence of God, so far as regards those who love God, is referred to by Paul in Romans 8. 28: "To them that love Him, God worketh all things together for good" (R.V. m.). And again, the Psalmist speaks of it thus: "The eyes of all wait upon Thee: and Thou givest them their meat in due season" (Psalm 145. 15).

In examining this subject we begin from the centre of a circle and work by ever-widening circles to the

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circumference, in order to take a broad and comprehensive view of the whole question.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN CREATION.

The subject matter of Genesis 1 and 2 is the record of the creation of the heavens and the earth; the subsequent ruin thereof by the unspecified introduction of evil; and the reconstruction of the earth as a habitation for the man and his wife whom God intended to put thereon. It is incredible that God should place the first human pair in a world which was not furnished, or that He should not provide them with suitable means of sustenance. God, therefore, furnished fruit-bearing trees, animals which later became meat for man (which was an instance of judgment being turned to mercy), milk (result of rich arable land) and honey (product of the flower); mist to produce growth; the treasures of the mine: in fine, all that was requisite for the maintenance and the continuity of the human race (Gen. 2. 8-19).

Through sin God, at times, exercises judgment, and often that judgment is operative in the field of nature; the drought is, however, providentially controlled, so that if it rains not on one city, it rains on another (Amos 4. 7). He has His way in the storm and in the whirlwind and the clouds are the dust of His feet (Nahum 1. 3). He now sends the rain for correction, or for mercy, or to water the earth. Thus spake Elihu (Job 37. 13).

The providential care of God is witnessed, though often not acknowledged, by every botanist, entomologist, zoologist, farmer, and sailor. All life is dependent upon God's goodness; and but for it the human race would long ago have become extinct.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN THE LIFE OF PERSONS.

Moving from the centre our first circle of providential care is that of the individual person. Consideration of a concrete example is one of the best

methods of grasping an abstract principle, and the life of Joseph well serves this purpose. With him everything, in early years, seemed to go wrong. His brethren put him in a pit, and later sold him to the Ishmaelites. From the house of Potiphar he was unjustly flung into prison. He was forgotten by the butler when the latter was restored to his office. But his own words, when reviewing his history to his brethren, are remarkable:—‘*God* did send me before you to preserve life’ (Gen. 45. 5); ‘*God* sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth and to save your souls alive by a great deliverance’ (Gen. 45. 7); ‘It was not you that sent me hither but *God*’ (Gen. 45. 8); ‘*God* hath made me Lord of all Egypt’ (Gen. 45. 9). From his position then he saw the over-ruling, controlling, restraining and directing hand of God over all, and he made due acknowledgment when God’s purpose had been accomplished. God *foresaw* the famine: He took steps long beforehand to provide against that event. He selected and fitted the man who was needed: and the broken threads of pit, and slavery, and prison could later be pieced together to make manifest a beautiful and complete design. For Divine providence presupposes a purpose which cannot be frustrated by any activities of man.

The history of Joseph is peculiar to Joseph. No two lives are alike, and therefore no two histories of God’s disciplinary dealing and training are alike. God adjusts His providential dealings in accordance with the peculiarities of the person concerned, and this accounts for differing experiences. No believer is ever left to the blind events of what men in their ignorance call ‘fate’; the life of every true believer in God is under the supervision of God.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN THE FAMILY.

The Providence of God operates also in the family life of His people; and the record of the family of Isaac and Rebekah, and their sons Jacob and Esau is

illuminating and instructive. It shows that God's providence operates in the midst of diverse natural conditions (Gen. 25. 27), parental weakness (v. 28) individual carelessness (v. 32), failing senses (27. 1), unprincipled trickery (ch. 27) and human fallibility (ch. 27. 33). In all these circumstances God was controlling events according to His sovereign election and purpose which He had plainly stated thus:—'The elder shall serve the younger' (25. 23). Thus at the birth of the twin brothers the child of sovereign choice was born second; to magnify the riches of God's grace the supplanting character of Jacob is indicated by an incident of his birth. Over all these varied events, so human and so true to life in all respects, was God Himself, Who controlled and overruled in every detail for the accomplishment of His purposes. The family life of the saints to-day is controlled in precisely the same way; and from this parents may take warning and encouragement.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN THE TRIBE.

A number of individual persons make up the family: a number of families make up the tribe. An examination of the genealogy of Matthew 1 reveals some interesting features. It is the genealogical tree of the tribe of Judah, in which there are incorporated four women, namely, two Canaanitish women, Tamar and Rahab: the Moabitess Ruth: and presumably the Hittitess, the wife of Uriah. The character of at least three of these is evil. Tamar's record, although she was wronged, is unsavoury. Rahab was a harlot, notwithstanding the efforts of some to whittle down the force of the Hebrew word used. Although the inspired record does not here name the woman whose relationship to Uriah is mentioned, and who gave herself to another, she is incorporated by Divine favour into the Messiah's genealogical table. Furthermore, certain names are omitted from this list: they are the names of men who were removed from the divine record.

because of judgment (See in this connection 1 Chron. 3. 11-12).

Now in all this the Providence of God is manifest. God was moving to a grand objective. He had a purpose in view, namely, to bring into the world the Messiah (Christ); and through Him to display God's true estimate of the gravity and heinousness of sin and His inexorable judgment of it, yet at the same time to show mercy to the sinner, notwithstanding the colour of the skin, or national disabilities or moral delinquencies. How well was this accomplished by the inclusion of such women within this table, and by the exclusion therefrom of others who, on natural grounds, were entitled to a place!

God is over all; and despite the many attempts of the devil to frustrate the purpose of God which was that the Messiah should come through the tribe of Judah, each attempt was turned by God into triumph, and the unholy unions which took place were overruled of God for the accomplishment of His own purposes, for "the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand."

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN NATIONAL AFFAIRS.

This may be seen in the book of Esther which contains no reference to the name of God, although His overruling control is everywhere manifest. It was only by the almighty power of God that such a varied series of events as those which happened could be co-ordinated, so that in the end God's people were preserved, and blessed, and given peace (see ch. 10). Consider the salient facts. Disobedience of the queen; her deposition; the replacement of the queen by a Jewish maiden; an assassination plot and the discovery of it by a Jew; the anti-Jewish scheme of Haman; the banquet; the intercession of the queen; the King's sleepless night; his discovery of the omission to reward Mordecai; Mordecai compensated; Haman hanged; the King's new decree. What a list of varied events! They all 'worked together for the good' of God's

people, and for the accomplishment of God's purpose to preserve that nation from extermination, for He had plans for them yet to be fulfilled. Let all who would to-day persecute that people beware, for God will not suffer His purposes to be defeated by the wickedness of men. He can use their wicked schemes to accomplish His own ends, so that ultimately they defeat themselves.

But let this be noted carefully also. In the present day God is not dealing with an earthly nation. He is calling out from the earthly nations a heavenly nation. There is now no one earthly nation which is governmentally owned of Him. Israel is *Lo-Ammi*, and Israel was and will ever be the only earthly nation owned of God. Yet there are governmental principles applicable to all nations which are laid down in the scriptures of truth and which hold good for all times. If these principles are observed, prosperity will result; if they are ignored, disaster will follow.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD—INTERNATIONALLY.

In the prophetic scriptures, and especially in Daniel 10-12 we are told of the existence and overthrow of four great empires. These chapters speak of the concomitant strife among the nations; and they set out also the final purpose which God is working out on earth, namely, "to bring again into the world the first-begotten from the dead": "to commit into His hands all judgment": to establish His Kingdom in Jerusalem and to make His earthly people Israel, when regenerate, His principal sphere of rule. All the strifes among the nations will end in this grand result. Although all nations in a coming day will together say "Let us break their bonds asunder and cast their cords from us," yet God will not be frustrated in His purpose. He *fore-sees* the state of affairs, but guards against it; and so controls events internationally that the territory of every nation may be adjusted in accordance with His purpose concerning Israel and His

coming King. That it is God's doing may not be manifest whilst the events are happening. It will perhaps, appear as though men had brought it about; but, in fact, everything will be overruled of God. The territory of every empire and nation is ordered of God, and the duration of each empire is also determined by Him. His design is so to order things that 'men shall seek the Lord.' In the past the nations ought, like the Queen of Sheba, to have sent their representatives to Jerusalem to worship. In a coming day this will be obligatory, and refusal to obey will result in severe punishment. The reader should study carefully in this connection Deut. 32. 8; Acts 17. vv. 26, 27; and Zech. 14. vv. 16 to end.

Deut. 10 shows that behind the things which are seen there are unseen powers of good and powers of evil resisting one another, and it demonstrates that such powers in their acting either for or against God's interests are restrained, directed and controlled by Him with the view of bringing about His eternal plans.

Finally, there is God's great act of

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in the death of His Son. Who would have thought that in what seemed to be a cruel and unjust tragedy God was working out His purpose? Yet so it was. Before the creation of the world God foresaw the introduction of sin into the human race; accordingly He took preparatory steps to meet the emergency and 'before the foundation of the world' His Son was foreordained to be the Lamb slain. In due time that Lamb came and died at the hands of wicked men; but God was over all; and by the wickedness of men He achieved His purpose. (See Acts 2. 23). If God has been so provident as to provide against the introduction of sin, ought not sinners to be provident and to take advantage of such provision? 'A prudent man *foreseeth* the evil and hideth himself.' Should this booklet fall into the hands of one who is not 'hidden'

by the Saviour from coming wrath, it is the writer's hope that such an one may be provident in this matter. How improvident it is to reject the provision of God's providence for the sinner!

The lack of providence on the part of people to-day is known to be the source of serious social troubles. That is why there are in the world Provident Societies of many sorts, which are means of encouraging people to provide for the future. Yet how many fail to look farther ahead than this life, and make no provision for eternity! And this, notwithstanding that God has so looked ahead and made provision for the sinner, if only he will take advantage of it.

If God has been provident toward you, ought you not to be provident toward yourself in the most important of all matters, namely the salvation of your soul?

THE SILENCE OF GOD.

THE problems of life are exceedingly numerous, but surely none is so perplexing as this.

Why is it that believers in many lands have prayed to God for deliverance from the ravages of war with apparently no success? The disaster has not been averted; but war has come with all its concomitant horrors. Many believing parents have prayed fervently for the safety of members of their own family circle (and of others) and yet calamities innumerable have occurred. These are some of the present-day problems of life which confront us. Space does not permit of a lengthy consideration of the problems arising out of the world-wide and age-long suffering, disease, injustice, oppression and cruelty which have perplexed the saints of God: only the fringe of the subject can be touched.

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It cannot truly be asserted that God does not care : that His love has ceased ; that His arm is shortened, or that His power is diminished. His word has not changed ; His promises remain. Prayer is still a vital and effective factor. Let not then the problems and perplexities undermine your confidence in God, or prevent you from continuing earnestly in prayer. Do not suffer them to break your faith in the promises of God's word, whilst ever taking care to make sure that the promises on which you rely are your property, and do not belong exclusively to the particular person or persons to whom they were made. Many disappointments and false hopes are the result of the misapplication by ineligible parties of individual promises made to particular persons.

The Scriptures of truth afford some help in understanding the problem of the silence of God without attempting to offer a present explanation of every difficulty connected with the subject. They reveal that God's silence serves many purposes, and is attributable to several causes, as will be seen from what follows.

THE SILENCE OF GOD IS A TEST OF MAN.

As an example, Job's experience may be cited. The conversations which took place between God and Satan and which are mentioned in the earlier part of the book of Job were unknown to Job himself. He and his friends could judge only by the facts as far as they knew them. The events recorded in the opening chapters of the book are a record of one trouble after another which happened to Job. Right was certainly on Job's side, and the Sabeans and the Chaldeans were clearly in the wrong. Even the elements seemed to be against Job ; and in addition, disease attacked his body ; whereas his wife, although no judgment such as that which was visited upon Sapphira fell upon her, dared to suggest that her husband should curse God, and die with the curse on his lips. During all this time God remained silent. Evil seemed to

triumph, the righteous suffered, and there seemed to be no hope. It could not be asserted that God was an indifferent spectator, but in fact He was silent; that is to say, He did not communicate to Job what He was doing or was about to do.

Job's three friends came to console him, and they remained speechless for seven days because of their amazement at his trouble; thereafter they began to philosophize on the matter. The gist of their argument was that Job was merely receiving the due reward of his sins, although outwardly he had posed as being a righteous man. They further suggested that they three had received good things because of their good conduct. To them the case presented no difficulties. Thus the silence of God tested these three men and made manifest what was in their hearts. Job, on the other hand, denied that he had merited such treatment. He affirmed his own righteousness, and challenged his friends to find fault with him. Whatever was the cause of his trouble he thought that it was certainly not attributable, to his sinfulness. The silence of God afforded the opportunity for Job's heart to discover itself. Yet sooner or later God breaks His silence. In Job's case God spoke and manifested Himself; with the result that Job said "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee, and I repent" that I should ever have said about myself or about God what I have said, "in dust and ashes." All four men were tested; and each in his turn revealed his self-righteous, conceited, deceitful and blind heart. None of this would have come out if God had broken His silence earlier. How often is this the case with the saints to-day! Let each examine himself.

THE SILENCE OF GOD IS A TEST OF FAITH.

For twenty-five years God kept Abraham waiting for the son who had been promised to him. What a long period of silent inactivity on the part of God, when natural hope was fast receding and despair

tended to usurp the place of faith! In the fulness of time God always breaks His silence; and, according to His word, He gave the promised son. A more prolonged test, however, was to come for the man who had already known what it was to experience the silence of God and to trust Him therein. For a further period of sixty years God was silent until He gave Isaac a son, and thus ensured the fulfilment of His promise to Abraham. A silence of eighty-five years, with but one break therein, was a severe test of Abraham's faith; but it proved to Abraham that God was the faithful, covenant-keeping, all-powerful God.

Joseph had a similar experience. God revealed to him by dream what his high destiny was to be; but the events which led up thereto did not seem to suggest any possibility that his dreams would be fulfilled. While he was passing through his trouble 'the word of the Lord tried him'; 'the iron went into his soul' (Psa. 105). For a time, evil seemed to triumph; his brothers, the Ishmaelites, Potiphar's wife, all succeeded in their wicked devices against him, and God remained silent. In the pit, on the wagons, and in the prison, no doubt Joseph prayed to God; but no immediate response was given. Instead of being permitted to return home to see his aged father, he was removed farther away into a foreign land where despair probably made many attacks upon the citadel of his heart. Yet, on his reviewing all things in the presence of his brethren as recorded in Genesis 45, he recognises, and says four times, that God was behind all the events which had happened to him, working out a grand purpose. The silence which God maintained during those long years was part of the outworking of His providential care. Joseph's faith was tested indeed!

Another, and much more mysterious example of the silence of God is the case of John Baptist, who was perplexed because the Messiah did not open the prison

to him who was bound, although he was there for righteousness' sake. The 'opening of the prison' was, according to the prophecy of Isaiah, part of the Messiah's work. Why then was John not delivered? His enquiry, whatever else it produced, did not result in an opened prison. God remained silent, and the man of God continued to suffer. A greater trial awaited him. On Herod's birthday, Herod's adulterous wife planned the murder of John, and he was beheaded. Why did not God intervene? Why should the wicked ruler and his satellites triumph, and the God-fearing Baptist suffer? Why did God allow matters to go to the full length of a murderous death? In our inability to give a complete answer, we may rest assured of two things, viz., the Wisdom and the Love of our God. When John's disciples heard what had happened, they 'went and told Jesus'; and saints are well-advised to lay these matters before God relying upon the sympathy of their Great High Priest, and to leave both the sorrow and the problem with Him.

Yet another example may be cited. "Lord, he whom Thou lovest is sick" was the message sent by the two sisters to the Lord concerning Lazarus: yet He, notwithstanding the urgent nature of the case, tarried two days further in the place where He was. Could He not have "spoken a word only" and have healed Lazarus? He could, but He did not. Why? Could He not have come earlier? He could, but He would not. Why? The disease advanced, and death took place; and the corpse of Lazarus is buried and decomposes. Why did He not come sooner? Consider this further mysterious utterance of the Lord: 'I am glad that I was not there.' Read the whole of John 11 and it will be seen that His delay, and His silence, were not the result of lack of love; but that deeper motives were in operation, and that larger purposes were being worked out than the mere healing of one sick man.

A similar problem confronted Habakkuk. The

wicked triumph; the less wicked suffer at their hand; and God is silent. What shall be the attitude of him who has to do with God? "The just shall live by his faith." This is the lesson for all suffering saints to-day; and there is comfort in the assurance that although in the night there may be weeping, joy cometh in the morning (Psa. 30. 5).

THE SILENCE OF GOD IS SOMETIMES BECAUSE OF
JUDGMENT.

Proverbs 1 says: "Because I have called and ye refused, ye also shall call and I will not answer." God shows Himself silent to the one who is deaf toward Him. This may be the reason why there are no answers to our prayers. When Israel mocked God's messengers and despised His message until there 'was no remedy,' God thereafter caused a famine of His word; and from the days of Malachi to the days of the Lord Jesus no prophet's voice was heard. The prophetic message was wanting. When at length that 'great prophet' like unto Moses arose, "Him" they did not "hear"; for He was rejected by His people and put to death. For this reason God has "returned to His place," and remains silent to the cries of Israel, His chosen, because they have not repented and are still guilty of the murder of His Son, their Messiah. If one will not listen to God, it may well be asked on what grounds can one expect that God will listen to him?

Let the reader consider Isa. 42. 14; 62. 1, and Hosea 5. 15 together with their contexts: these passages will furnish help in understanding the judicial silence of God so far as regards His people Israel.

THE SILENCE OF GOD IS AT TIMES INEVITABLE.

The language of the blessed Lord Jesus expressed by the prophet in Psalm 22 may appear rather difficult to understand. It relates to His prayer in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. His was true prayer;

it was the true expression of His own desire, accompanied by a ready submission to His Father's will. It seemed that God did not hear; but Heb. 5. 5 removes that impression by stating that He 'was heard.' The Revisers' translation of Psalm 22. 2 should be noted. God did not, apparently, 'answer' His Son in the days of His flesh. All the wicked scheming which took place between the Jewish leaders and Judas for the betrayal and murder of Jesus of Nazareth achieved its end. For the time being God was silent.

Is not the explanation of these events to be found in the fact that the cross of the Lord Jesus and His death thereon were integral features of an eternal purpose which had been determined prior to the foundation of the world? It all happened according to the "determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God." If the death of the Lord Jesus had not taken place, the counsel of the Lord would not have stood: it would have been annulled. Inasmuch as that was impossible, and the death of the cross was essential to the effecting of the purposes of God, it was inevitable that He should remain silent to the cry of His Son when His sufferings reached their climax. In God's light we see light to-day. If the answer to our prayer to God would entail the frustration of a purpose which He has in regard to things earthly or national, it must be obvious that our prayer cannot be answered, for the 'counsel of the Lord' must stand. God allows and overrules the wickedness and activities of men and nations in order to bring about His own purposes in the earth; and this should ever be borne in mind when the saints address God on the subject of national or international affairs.

THE SILENCE OF GOD IS A FEATURE OF THE REIGN OF GRACE.

Since Israel rejected Christ and crucified Him, God has ceased to dwell among His earthly people. His present activities are concerned with the formation

of an elect nation by visiting the Gentiles to take out of them a heavenly people (the Church, or Assembly) for His name (Acts 15. 14). In consequence of this the ways of God with men have to a large extent been changed. Instead of visiting the actual murderers of the Lord Jesus with judgment from heaven, God has responded to the prayer of the Lord Jesus Who pleaded 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' To the murderers first was given the offer of mercy (Acts 1. 8), and to all sinners thereafter forgiveness of sins has been offered upon repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ. God is dealing with men in grace and longsuffering, not desiring that any should perish. He is not imputing to men their trespasses, but is bidding them to be reconciled to Himself. Although the cry of His elect goes up to Him now, He defers avenging them because of His longsuffering with their persecutors (Luke 18. 1-8). The time according to man's reckoning may seem long, but with God a thousand years is as one day, and *vice versa*.

It must, indeed, constitute not a small difficulty that believers through the Christian era have suffered martyrdom in the cruellest of ways. Youths and maidens have been flung to the lions in the arenas of ancient Rome; and, in more recent times, the witnesses of Christ have been burned at the stake at Smithfield and elsewhere. Yet God did not intervene in these cases as He did when He delivered Daniel from the mouths of the lions, or when He delivered the three Hebrew men from the fiery furnace. *Is God the same to-day?* Herein lies the answer: if God did not avenge, or indeed prevent, the death of His sinless, innocent and holy Son, the darling of His heart, Who has no equal for loveliness, it cannot be expected that He will avenge or even prevent the sufferings and death of His people, however choice they may be, who have fellowship with Christ in His sufferings. For Christ and for His people the day of vengeance will surely

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come, inasmuch as His blood is still required from the hand of the guilty, and the blood of His martyrs still cries from under the altar. But the time of vengeance has not yet come. Though James was killed with the sword, Stephen was stoned; and Paul and Peter were among the first of the long list of martyrs, we may be assured that God has not forgotten. "I tell you He will avenge His elect."

GOD'S SILENCE IS THE PRECURSOR OF A COMING STORM.

In Rev. 8. 1 we read of silence in heaven for the space of 'half an hour.' It may well be that this refers to the first half of the last week of Daniel's well-known prophecy (which 'week' is called an 'hour' in several places in the Apocalypse) wherein the man of sin progresses with his wicked work apparently without hindrance. In the "midst" of that week, war is declared against the devil and his angels in heaven; and they are cast out. On earth, simultaneously, the Man of Sin breaks his covenant with Israel. This marks the beginning of the period in which the wrath of God is poured out from heaven on men, terminating in the 'great and terrible day of the Lord.' As stillness in nature betokens a coming storm, so the stillness in divine movement indicates the same. At the end of the present age (of which the silence of God is a chief feature) there will break the storm of God's wrath against a Christ-rejecting world, and who shall abide it?

CONCLUSION.

We conclude then that the problem of the Silence of God is not completely unanswerable. Despite the fact that certain problems connected with it appear at present to be insoluble, the Lord is able to maintain His saints in faith and joy, notwithstanding perplexity and sorrow. We may be sure that ultimately God will break His silence, for the good of those who love Him, for the suppression of evil and for the maintenance of His own glory. May the Lord grant patience to all His saints!