

But God

On the Providence of God from Genesis to Ephesians

“But God.” More often than not, a believer says these words standing on the far side of some hardship, surveying the ground he has crossed, in awe of God who brought him through it all. That praise is right and good; God is indeed in control and orchestrates every outcome of everything that takes place, and He alone is worthy of praise. Joseph offers these two words to the brothers who sold him into slavery. Asaph offers them after his faith has nearly given way. To say “but God” over the wreckage of a hard providence is not wishful thinking; it is worship, the worship which comes from a soul that has seen whose hand was governing everything the whole time.

If anything in that worship is ever misplaced, it is not the praise itself but where the praise comes to rest. We are quick to glorify God for the outcome, for the way the situation finally turned, when the turning was never the deepest thing He was doing. The same sovereignty we rightly praise was aiming past our circumstances all along, toward an end greater than any earthly deliverance: His own glory. This is the doctrine of providence, the confession that God ordained the whole course of a life before it began and ruled every step of it, the bright and the bitter and even the sinful, according to the counsel of His own will, and ruled all of it toward Himself, and in aiming at His own glory He was never aiming away from our good, since His glory is the highest good a creature can be given.

Paul, as Paul is given to doing, takes the words deeper still. He does not replace the believer’s praise; he follows it down to its bottom. Before he will let “but God” lift us, he uses it

to lay us flat, speaking it over the dead, so that we first hear what we were when mercy reached us: not struggling, not stumbling, but dead in our trespasses, with nothing in us to save. To follow “but God” from Genesis to Ephesians is to watch a believer’s backward-looking praise lift its eyes, from the deliverance it began with to the glory of God it was always meant to land on, until the deepest object of all that praise stands plain: God glorifying Himself by raising the dead.

I. Joseph: Evil Meant for Good

Joseph had been handed every reason a man could want to nurse a grievance. His brothers hated him, stripped him, threw him into a cistern, and sold him to traders bound for Egypt, then dipped his coat in blood and let their father mourn him as a boy torn apart by beasts. What followed was not relief but more of the same. He was bought as a slave, lied about by Potiphar’s wife when he refused her, and locked in a prison, where the one man who might have spoken for him forgot him for two full years. None of it was deserved. Joseph did not suffer because he had sinned his way into the pit; he suffered because his life had been appointed to run through it. And when his brothers at last stood before him, terrified that with their father newly dead he would finally take his revenge, Joseph refused the revenge and gave them instead the meaning of everything that had been done to him: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good . . .” (Genesis 50:20, ESV).

The verb is the hinge. One word governs both halves of the sentence: you devised, God devised. The brothers planned evil and God planned good, and both plans bore down on the same life, but only one of them was sovereign. Joseph does not pretend the evil was not evil, nor reduce his brothers to innocent tools who carry no guilt. He says that over their wickedness, and never once thwarted by it, stood a God who had purposed good and would certainly have it. God

did not author the evil; the wickedness was the brothers' own, and so was the guilt. Yet their sin never fell for a moment outside His rule. He governed it without sharing in it, bending it to the good He had decreed before the world began. This is no God reacting to a crisis. Calvin puts it without flinching: Joseph "well considers the providence of God," beholding, in Calvin's image, God's hand on the helm of the whole government of the world, steering a course that no storm and no betrayal could turn.¹ The pit, the false charge, the forgotten years: God was not absent from a single one of them, nor merely permitting them at a distance. He was ruling them.

And His rule had an aim. Paul states the whole doctrine in a sentence the church has leaned on ever since: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). All things. Not the pleasant things separated out from the painful ones, but all of them together, the betrayal and the prison no less than the throne, worked by God toward good. But we have to press on what the good is, because Joseph's good was never a full granary. Paul does not leave the word undefined; in the very next line he tells us what it is, that those God foreknew He "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). The good is Christ, a people remade into His likeness, and that is the end God Himself is always driving toward, the end in which His glory shines. He kept many people alive in the famine, but through that preservation He kept alive the family of promise, the line that would carry the covenant down to Christ. The grain Joseph stored was real, and the lives it saved were real, yet the saving served something far larger than bread. God was glorifying Himself in the salvation of His people, and the whole bitter history of Joseph had been bent, deliberately and from before the first day of it, to that purpose. Joseph looks back

¹John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. John King, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), on Genesis 50:20. The image of God "holding the helm of the government of the world" is from Calvin's comment on the same verse.

and does not merely find a happy outcome. He sees the living God who had authored every chapter and aimed it at His own name.

II. Asaph: A Portion That Does Not Fail

Joseph could see the design because he stood at the end of it. Asaph wrote from the middle, where the design is far harder to believe. Psalm 73 is a song about the oldest crisis of faith there is. Asaph, a Levite set apart to lead Israel's worship, looked out at the world and saw the wicked thriving. They were not being punished; they were comfortable, fat, untroubled, and arrogant about it, while he, who had labored to keep his heart clean, had earned nothing for it but affliction. "My feet had almost stumbled," he confesses, "my steps had nearly slipped" (Psalm 73:2). The prosperity of the godless nearly cost him his faith. If this is how the world is run, he reasoned, then justice is a fiction and devotion is wasted breath.

He could not reason his way out of it. It broke open only when he came into the presence of God: "I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end" (Psalm 73:17). There Asaph saw what no vantage outside the sanctuary could show him, that the prosperity of the wicked is a moment and their end is destruction, and that God had not for an instant surrendered the world to them. The psalm turns there, from complaint to worship, and the turn comes to rest on this: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:26). Asaph's circumstances do not improve. His flesh fails, and he says so. What changes is that he has finally seen where his treasure is. The wicked have their prosperity, and it is all they will ever have. Asaph has God, and God does not fail when flesh and heart and the whole visible world give way beneath a man. This world was never the reward. It is passing, and the prosperity that tempted him to envy is passing with it. The reward, the only harvest that outlasts the grave, is God Himself. And notice what this "but God" is doing, because it is not

quite the “but God” of Joseph. Joseph’s stood over the evil of his brothers and overruled it; God was the sovereign agent bending wickedness to good. Asaph’s stands over his own failing flesh and heart, and what it names is less an act God performs than a possession the believer is given: God is the strength of his heart and his portion forever. The first “but God” is God overruling. This one is God possessed. Between the throne where Joseph could read the whole design and the resurrection where Paul will reveal how deep it runs, Asaph stands on the middle ground every believer walks, where the design is invisible and the only answer to the prosperity of the wicked is a Person, not an explanation. He is not handed a reason. He is handed a portion. And that portion is the very good the glory of God secures, because to have God for your portion is to possess the highest good there is, the good in which the soul at last finds rest.

III. Ephesians: Dead, but Made Alive

Joseph saw God’s providence ruling his suffering. Asaph saw God’s justice and God’s sufficiency when everything he could see had failed him. Paul takes the same two words and drives them all the way to the floor of the human condition, to the one place where there is nothing left to work with. He does not begin with hardship. He begins with death. “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked” (Ephesians 2:1). Not weakened by them, not sickened, not merely asleep. Dead. Paul means what Ezekiel was shown in the valley, a floor of dry bones with no breath in them, past helping themselves and past wanting to (Ezekiel 37:1–2). That is what we were. We had walked ourselves into the grave, following the course of this world and the prince of the power of the air, children of wrath by nature, without the power to so much as wish ourselves out of it. There is no reflection to offer at this point, no endurance to be admired, no envy to repent of. There is a corpse.

And onto the corpse, Paul speaks the words: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:4–5). Everything after the “but” is God, and God alone. He is rich in mercy. He loved us. He made us alive, and He did it while we were dead, which is the only state He ever found us in. This is not the rescue of people who were slipping. It is the resurrection of people who were gone. Goodwin says the apostle has carried his readers across one sea, the dead sea of their own corruption, and launched them out onto another, vaster and deeper, the open sea of God’s free grace.² The first was a sea we had drowned in. The second is one we could never have reached on our own, and God does not invite us toward it; He carries us out onto it Himself, with no oar in our hands and no breath in our lungs but the breath He gives.

Why “rich in mercy”? Because mercy is the name God gave Himself. When He passed before Moses and proclaimed who He is, this stood at the center of the proclamation: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). Abounding in steadfast love. Of all His perfections, this is the one God led with when He told us His name, and it is the one Paul reaches back for at the very moment the dead are raised. Mercy is the wealth God claims as His own; nowhere does Scripture call Him rich in anything else. And this is the wealth He pours out on corpses.

Then Paul tells us why, and the why is the whole point. God “raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6–7). There is the end the “but God” was always serving. God made us alive, and the life He

²Thomas Goodwin, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Ephesians*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862), 140.

gave is truly ours, yet He raised us for something deeper than our own flourishing, that He might display, forever, across the coming ages, the measureless riches of His grace. Our good is not lost in that end but secured by it, for the highest gift He can give a creature is Himself. The same purpose that ruled Joseph's pit and met Asaph in the sanctuary rules our resurrection: God is glorifying Himself, here in the kindness He shows to the dead He has raised. Paul says it once more a few lines on, that "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Ephesians 2:10). Even the good we now do is His work in us, and it is for His praise. From the first word to the last, the "but God" reached past our comfort and our vindication to something steadier than either, the glory of the God who works all things, our suffering and our death and even our sin, toward the everlasting display of His grace, and who in that same glory gives us Himself.

IV. To the Praise of His Glory

This is why "but God" is the steadiest thing a Christian can learn to say. It does not rest on the hope that our circumstances will turn, because sometimes they will not. Asaph's flesh failed, and ours will fail too. It rests on the God who was ruling the whole time we could not see Him rule, who decreed every dark providence toward a good we could not have imagined, and whose good rises past our ease into His glory, which is the rest the soul was made for. Joseph could look back over a lifetime of evil done to him and worship, because God had meant all of it for good. Asaph could watch his strength fail and call God his portion, because the prosperity of the wicked was a vapor and his God was forever. And we, who were dead, are told that we are seated already in the heavenly places, because the God who is rich in mercy raised us for the unending showing of His grace. Whatever stretch of your life you cannot read at the moment,

you are not waiting to learn whether God is in it. He has already told you whose hand is on the helm, and where He is steering, and to what end.

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Ephesians 2:1–2, 4–7