

## CHAPTER 5

### God's Providence and its Relation to Prayer, Healing, Personhood and Sin

#### 5.1 Introduction

The first question one might ask in a debate about the providential hand of God on His creation is: how should one, in this context, define providence? According to Tupper (1985:579), providence means that God “sees ahead” and “watches after” creaturely existence generally and each individual specifically. Williams (1996:117) defines providence as, “the overseeing care and guardianship of God for all His creation.” As such, God is understood as one intimately concerned with His creation. In certain ways, God is central to the conduct of the Christian life, which means, Christians are able to live in the assurance that God is present and continuously active in their lives.

However, the role of prayer is a problem that has concerned thoughtful Christians when considering the *nature* of providence, and how it links up to miraculous events, and specifically, physical healing. Erickson (2002:430) states that the difficulty stems from the question, “What does prayer really accomplish?” On the one hand, if prayer has any effect on what happens, then it

seems that God's plan was not fixed in the first place. On the other hand, if God has settled His plan and He will do what He is going to do, then does it matter whether one prays or not? Every committed Christian wants to believe that prayer makes a difference. According to Ware (2000:164): "What is the point in praying, if prayer itself turns out to be superfluous and ineffectual"?

Polkinghorne (1998:84-85) refers to providence as *Divine action* in the world. From a theological and a scientific view, he sees providence divided into three levels.

*General providence.* This is the Divine sustaining of the order of the world, in which one understands the laws of nature as expressions of God's faithfulness. The deist, as much as the theist, will accept this idea.

*Special providence.* This view concerns itself with particular Divine actions within cosmic history. It is understood as taking place within the grain of physical process, thus not immediately distinguishable from other happenings. God may act through famine or through times of plenty, and this may be discernible by faith, but it will not be demonstrable to the sceptic.

*Miracle*. The concern here is with radically unnatural events, such as turning water into wine or restoring the dead to life. If such things happen, their very nature suggests that they are the effects of Divine action of an unusual kind.

For Polkinghorne, these categories are not entirely sharply defined. There are some events (such as those that might be interpretable as highly significant coincidences) which might seem to fall into a grey borderline area.

Nevertheless, the classification provides a useful taxonomy for thinking about possible Divine acts. As a result, in recent writing about science and theology there has been much discussion of God's action in the world. The following is to survey some of the suggestions put forward.

## **5.2 Providence in Prayer and Healing**

One should note from the start of this discussion, that the above question is simply one particular form of the larger issue of the relationship between human effort and Divine providence. Barth (1958:148) defines Divine providence in terms of the sovereignty of God when he states that God ...

rules unconditionally and irresistibly in all affairs.... Nature is God's 'servant', the instrument of His purposes.... God controls, orders, and decides, for nothing can be done except the will of God.... God foreknows and predetermines and foreordains.

Although this statement is true, it does appear from Scripture that God often works in some sort of partnership with humans. One could, in a sense say that God does not act unless humans do play their part. Thus, when Jesus ministered in His hometown of Nazareth, He did not perform any major miracles; all He did was heal a few sick people. Scripture states that Jesus “was amazed at their lack of faith” (Mark 6:6), suggesting the people of Nazareth simply did not bring their needy ones to Him for healing. Often the act of faith was necessary for the Lord to act, but it seems that this was lacking in Nazareth. To see it from another perspective, Bloesch (1978:31, 57) explains:

While God’s ultimate purposes are unchangeable..., His immediate will is flexible and open to change through the prayers of His people. A personal God, who loves and cares, can be solicited in prayer. Prayer can work miracles because God makes Himself dependent on the requests of His children.

In the view of Erickson (2002:431), when God wills the end, He also wills the means. Therefore, in Erickson’s view, prayer does not change what God has purposed to do; it is simply the means by which He carries out His final objective. However Thiessen (1979:129) states that some hold that prayer can have no real effect on God, since He has already decreed just what He will do in every instance, however he does argue that this is an extreme position. One must not ignore James 4:2, “You do not have because you do not ask.” One could say, God does some things only in answer to prayer, He does other things without anyone’s praying, and He does some things contrary to the prayers offered. In His omniscience God has already taken all these things into account,

and in His providence He sovereignly works out everything in accordance with His own purpose and plan. Thiessen further argues:

If we do not pray for the things that we might get by prayer, we do not get them. If He wants something done for which no one prays, He will do them without anyone praying. If we pray for things contrary to His will, He refuses to grant them. Thus, there is a perfect harmony between His purpose and providence, and man's freedom.

In this regard, one needs to consider the contentious issue concerning whether God heals when one prays.

The twentieth and early twenty-first century has seen a remarkable growth in interest in the subject of the spiritual healing of the body. This growth has arisen in three related but distinct stages of movements (see Erickson 2001:852-853). Firstly, the Pentecostal movement, which arose and grew in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, and stressed the return of certain of the more spectacular gifts of the Holy Spirit. Then, about the middle of the century, the Neo-Pentecostal or Charismatic movement began; it had many of the same emphases. In the 1980's and onwards the "Third Wave" arose. These movements put greater stress on the miracles of spiritual healing than does Christianity in general. Often they make no real attempt to give a theological explanation or basis for these healings. As such, when one raises the question, the answer often given is that healing, no less than forgiveness of sins and salvation, is to be found within the atonement. The argument is that Christ died to carry away not only sin, but sickness as well. Among the major

advocates of this view was A. B. Simpson, founder of what is today known as the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

One of the striking features of the view that Christ's death brings healing for the body, according to Simpson (1880:30-31), is the idea that the presence of illness in the world is a result of the fall. When sin entered the human race, a curse (actually a series of curses) was pronounced on humanity; diseases were part of that curse. Since illness is a result of the fall, not simply of the natural constitution of things, it cannot be combated solely by natural means. Being of spiritual origin, it must be combated in the same way the rest of the effects of the fall are combated - by spiritual means, and specifically by Christ's work of atonement. Intended to counter the effects of the fall, His death covers not only guilt for humanity's sin, but also humanity's sickness. Healing of the body is therefore part of a Christian's great redemption right. And if that is the case, then when one prays for a healing, whatever the sickness might be, healing should take place.

However, the research that has been undertaken on the relationship between prayer and healing over several decades does not confirm the above contention. The following is a breakdown of these findings.

### **5.3 Historical Aspects of Prayer and Medicine**

In various interviews and surveys undertaken over several decades by prominent scientists and medical doctors (see Meyers & Benson 1992; Angel 1985; Kleinman, Eisenberg, Good 1978; Engel 1977), it was found that most people believe that not only does the mind affect the body (a view with which most scientists would agree), but there are also supernatural forces that have an intense effect on one's physical and emotional well-being (a view with which most scientists would disagree).

From a scientific perspective, the important question is: how should one deal with reports of miraculous healings and the belief that prayer can affect healing? Is there a special connection between belief in the supernatural and physical well-being? With the accelerating technical advances of Western medicine, there are increasing patient complaints against the medical community for their exclusionary focus on the biomedical model of disease. According to these surveys, it would seem that many patients, particularly if their disease is severe, want metaphysical as well as medical interventions; that is, they want a direct link from their medical care to God.

In a later study and in response to these findings, McCullough (1995:15-29), in a review of the prayer literature, considered the following four areas of prayer research as far as man is concerned:

- prayer and subjective well being;
- prayer as a form of coping;
- prayer and psychiatric symptoms;
- intercessory prayer.

He reported that both the frequency of prayer and the presence of mystical and religious experience during prayer were predictive of subjective well being on many indexes. It was, however, stated that several confounds in the studies reviewed rendered the data interpretation problematic. Variables such as religious commitment and socio-demographics were not controlled. Thus, if one prays often but has little commitment to religious belief, the positive affects on subjective well-being may be predicted to diminish.

McCullough further observed that prayer is used more often for symptoms that have been treated with medication, and have been discussed with a physician, than those that have not. One obvious problem found is that prayer as an effective coping response is confounded with medical treatment. Thus, as one experiences the effect of the medical treatment, there may be a tendency to credit change to prayer.



What about intercessory prayer, or the act of praying for another? Sir Francis Galton (1872:125-135) was the first to apply statistical analysis in trying to determine the effects of intercessory prayer. While his data collection method was flawed, he inferred that intercessory prayer was not a significant predictor of life span or social class. Since Galton's study in 1872, there have been at least six empirical studies looking into the effect of intercessory prayer. Collipp (1969:201-204), Elkins, Anchor & Sandler (1979:81-87), Joyce & Weldon (1965:367-377), O'Laoire (1997: 38-53), and Wirth & Barret (1994:61-67) all studied the effect of prayer on various medical conditions and found no statistically significant effect for intercessory prayer. Green (1993:2752), however, did find positive expectancy (the belief in the effectiveness of prayer) in relation to intercessory prayer to have a significant affect on patient anxiety levels. Thus, for those patients who had a high expectancy for the effectiveness of prayer to reduce anxiety, anxiety was reduced.

Although these studies do not validate or deny the effect of prayer, the question remains unanswered: does prayer work?

#### **5.4 Does Prayer Work?**

The question one might now ask is: Should medical doctors or psychologists advise their patients to pray? According to Sloan, Bagiella & Powell (1999:664-667), "it is premature to promote faith and religion as adjunctive medical

treatments." According to them, so far, the existing research on the effect of prayer is so flawed in terms of controlling for viable alternative theories and the likelihood of errors, that belief in prayer for physical and emotional well-being is simply unwarranted. However, the empirical evidence strongly suggests that expectancies for desired outcomes, social connectedness, and deep religious positive expectancies may be effective buffers for the stressors associated with various medical conditions. As such, any intervention that improves patient well-being is valuable. One could also ask how psychology plays a role in understanding the effectiveness of prayer in ones life.

## **5.5 Psychology and Prayer**

The study of prayer in the early history of modern psychology was without doubt, a thriving concern (see Pratt 1908 & Strong 1909). In the years that followed, however, the study of prayer dropped dramatically, following the general trend of declining interest in the relation between psychology and religious beliefs (see Spilka & McIntosh 1999). However, during the last several years, researchers have revisited the topic of prayer (see Hood, Morris, & Harvey, 1993; Ladd & Spilka 2002; Laird, Snyder, Rapoff, & Green, 2001; Poloma & Gallup 1991). Consequently, Ladd & Spilka (2002) proposed an explicit theoretical basis for understanding prayer as a means of forming cognitive connections. One should state that none of these proposals were based on the premise that one was

dealing with a personal God when praying. As a result, one might then ask:  
What has this to do with providence?

Reasons for bringing this into the discussion, is to show that many pray without really believing that anything will happen, except within them. And of course, the person praying has the comfort of knowing they have someone they can talk to, whether the desired outcome of the prayer manifests or not (this is explored further on). According to Ladd & Spilka (2002), prayer contains *inward*, *outward*, and *upward* dimensions as postulated by Foster (1992). The theory behind this is that inward prayers emphasise self-examination. Outward prayers focus on strengthening human to human connections. Upward prayers centre on the human-Divine relationship.

Besides the directionality of prayer put forth, Ladd & Spilka (2002) also reported three second-order factors; referred to as higher orders that appear to represent the intentionality of prayer.

Higher order factor one, consists of content stressing intercession.

- Outward: Prayer on behalf of someone's difficulties.
- Outward: Prayer to share another's pain.
- Inward: Prayer to evaluate one's spiritual status.

In broad terms, it seemingly represents a way of connecting which highlights the internal conditions of others as well as ones-self. Engaging in intercessory prayer compels recognition of another's inner struggle, even as examination prayer evaluates one's own private situation. Perhaps even more intense is the prayer of suffering or the willingness to enter someone else's pain to provide comfort.

The second higher order factor encompasses prayers of rest.

- Upward: Searching for stillness, sacrament.
- Upward: Encountering tradition, and tears.
- Inward: Experiencing personal turmoil.

Here, connections with the Divine appear to provide both peace and pain. These mixed experiences of spiritual pleasure and pain are not uncommon (cf. Weil 1951).

The third higher order factor is marked by:

- Outward: Assertiveness and petitionary prayer.
- Outward: Material request approaches to praying.
- No inward experience is recorded here.

This factor shows connections based on a bold use of prayer. Instead of abandoning one's needs, this type of prayer puts those needs at its centre. The

research conducted did not refer to any empirical data stating whether any of the needs prayed for were received.

However, what these researchers have uncovered and systemised, is correct, and does throw more light on the subject of prayer. It also exposes the need for evangelical research to be conducted in this area of prayer and its effect on God's people. Unfortunately, all the research conducted fails to answer the question of God's involvement in ones prayers, other than at a superficial level. As such, the comfort of knowing that from an inward, outward and upward belief, prayer does to a certain degree accomplish something is not enough in the author's view. Scripture is clear that God is concerned for the health and well-being of His people. A belief in a theistic God who is actively involved in His creation, demands deeper answers to the prayer question and what it can accomplish, than that given by science.

It is unfortunate that many of the studies undertaken around prayer and healing were based on empirical data, inclining to ignore the omnipotence and omni-benevolence of God. In the author's view, it was also not pointed out whether any of the subjects interviewed, or the scientists conducting the experiments, had a believing trusting faith in God, even though they did pray. So far, the author of this work has not found any major research undertaken by evangelicals to counter-claim these scientific findings. It is unfortunate, but many scholars, even those in the theological disciplines, are sceptic, when it comes to

anything related to healing or any miraculous events. Bultmann (1958:16), one of the most influential New Testament Scholars of the previous century, is the most prominent exponent of a non-miraculous Christianity. He identifies the miraculous as an aspect of the mythological world-view that has been supplanted by the world-view of modern science. For example, he asserted that miracles were “mythology”. For Bultmann, the scientific world-view has rendered the idea of the miraculous untenable for contemporary humanity. Bultmann (1958:37-38) wrote, "Modern men take it for granted that the course of nature and of history, like their own inner life and their practical life, is nowhere interrupted by the intervention of supernatural powers." He adds "...modern man acknowledges as reality, only such phenomena or events as are comprehensible within the framework of the rational order of the universe. He does not acknowledge miracles because they do not fit into this lawful order."

However, the question remains as to why the Bible would instruct Christians to pray in all circumstances, if God were not going to answer any of their prayers; specifically prayers for healing. Although it was suggested that the data presented was flawed, and that much research is still needed, one may ask: Is that a good enough answer when reading the negative statements made within these studies about the relationship between God, prayer and healing?

In all fairness, one must say that natural science deals with facts. It was presented in the introductory chapter of this thesis that facts are the way that the

natural scientist builds a coherent framework for understanding the world (see Barton 1999:17). Unfortunately, as this framework has developed, it has conflicted with theology and will conflict with theology in future studies until both disciplines find common ground. The reason: As science exposes itself to new data it is subject to change, thus it is continuously evolving. One could say there are no absolutes at this time in the scientific world, especially in its understanding of prayer. None of the scientists quoted can claim that their observations have acquired the status of ultimate truth. In this vein, the following letter sums up what the general consensus by the theological world is on the findings of natural science.

In a letter written to the scientific magazine *Nature*, Donald MacKay (1997:502) from the Department of Communications and Neuroscience, at University of Keele in the United Kingdom wrote;

In scientific laws we describe, as best we can, the pattern of precedent we observe in the sequence of natural events. While our laws do not prescribe what must happen, they do prescribe what we ought to expect on the basis of precedent. If by a “miracle” we mean an unprecedented event...then science says that miracles ought not be expected on the basis of precedent. What science does not (and cannot) say...is that the unprecedented does not (or cannot) occur...We cannot dogmatically exclude the ever present possibility that the truth about our world is stranger than we have imagined.

Although as previously submitted; doubtless, science has achieved enormous success as ways of knowing the structures and processes of the

material world, physical science, it appears, leaves no place for Divine action. One should also declare that it is a human moral trait to seek explanations. Regardless of whether this is in science, or any other discipline, each could claim that they are doing research simply for the very sake of understanding how nature operates. This is irrespective of whether it is in religion or any other field that deals with unexplainable events, e.g. the discipline of quantum physics.

Natural science needs to understand that if major breakthroughs are to be achieved in the dialogue between science and theology, scientific methods, as advanced as they are, hold no intrinsic guarantee that it can lead to ultimate truth, specifically when it comes to unexpected happenings, i.e. when one prays and things happen.

Regarding this, Bloesch (1978:58) writes:

Evangelical prayer is based on the view that a sovereign God can and does make Himself dependent on the requests of His children. He chooses to realise His purposes in the world in collaboration with His people. To be sure, God knows our needs before we ask, but He desires that we discuss them with Him so that He might work with us as His covenant partners toward their solution. There is, of course, a time to submit as well as a time to strive and wrestle with God in prayer, but this should come always at the end of prayer and never at the beginning. Moreover, our submission is not a passive resignation to fate but a relinquishing of our desires and requests into the hands of a living God to answer as He wills.



A question that now seems to surface is: How does God influence humanity regarding prayer and His answering of it, and how does this in turn affect surrounding activity to bring about Gods Divine will?

## 5.6 God's Actions

To start, it has been put forward throughout this work until now, that there is no doubt that the last twenty years has seen a remarkable renewal of interest in the relation of theology and science (see Sanders 2002). One particularly difficult tangle of issues has to do with the idea, deeply rooted in the theistic traditions that God acts in the world. From a science view, Murphy (1996:4) defines these actions as a *bottom-up and top-down causation*.

The fundamental forces of physics underlie chemistry and biology, allowing emergent levels of order in the hierarchical structure of systems. Basic physical laws determine what happens at the microscopic level, and hence underlie functioning at the macroscopic levels, through bottom-up causation. The higher levels in turn, however, affect the processes at work at the lower levels through top-down causation (see also Peacocke 1993).

The question is: What is the relation between theological depictions of the world as the scene of divine action, and scientific descriptions of the world as an intelligible structure of natural law? Can God be understood to act entirely in and through the regular structures of nature or does a robust account of Divine action also require the affirmation that God acts to redirect the course of events

in the world, bringing about effects that would not have occurred had God not so acted? If one says the latter, then is one committed to the claim that God at least sometimes performs miracles, in the familiar (if truncated) modern sense of an event caused by God that “violates” the laws of nature?

No doubt a theistic Biblical world-view involves a strong conception of Divine sovereignty over the world and human affairs, even as it presumes human freedom and responsibility. While too numerous to list here, Biblical passages affirming God’s sovereignty and Divine action have been grouped by Carson (1981:24-35) under four main headings: (1) God is the creator, ruler, and possessor of all things, (2) God is the ultimate personal cause of all that happens, (3) God elects His people, and (4) God is the unacknowledged source of good fortune or success. As such, no one taking the many scriptural passages attesting to God’s actions in the world seriously, can embrace currently fashionable libertarian revisionism, which denies God’s sovereignty over the contingent events of history.

However, there is no doubt according to Barrett (2004:142), that Divine action is a long-standing topic of debate. If the world is no longer construed in terms of the mechanistic Newtonian picture but rather as a world of flexibility and openness to change, what is the manner and scope of Divine action and wherein lies the causal joint? Where does God actually act? Furthermore, has God in eternity past *determined* the course of all future events? Although

determinism and Divine Causality have been discussed in a previous chapter, it nevertheless has far-reaching implications concerning prayer and thus requires further investigation. The first area one would need to consider is the act of determinism.

## 5.7 Bottom-up Causality

This particular term states that all events in the world are the result of some previous event, or events. Accordingly, all of reality is already in a sense predetermined or pre-existent, and therefore, nothing new can come into existence. Thus the question: Why pray? This closed view of the universe sees all events in the world simply as effects of other prior effects – a sort of *supervenience* or *emergence* taking place - and has particular implications for morality, science, and theology. Ultimately, if determinism is correct, then all events in the future are as unalterable as are all events in the past.

Consequently, human freedom is simply an illusion and the need of prayer irrelevant in changing surrounding reality, as its course of action – in a sense - has already been determined. The question then is: How does this affect or impact on human freedom?

Regarding the question of determinism, Murphy (1995) has proposed that God determines all *quantum indeterminacies* but arranges that law-like regularities usually come about in order to make stable structures and scientific

investigation possible, and to ensure that human actions have dependable outcomes so that moral choices are thus possible. As such, orderly relationships do not constrain God, since He includes them in His purposes. Murphy holds that in human life God acts both at the quantum and at higher levels of mental activity but does it in such a way that it does not violate human freedom.

An alternative would be to say that while most quantum events occur by chance, God influences certain quantum events without violating the statistical laws of quantum physics (see Russell 1998). However, a possible objection to this model is that it assumes bottom-up causality within nature once God's action has occurred and thus seems to concede the reductionism's claim that the behaviour of all entities is determined by their smallest parts (or lowest levels). The action would be bottom-up even if one assumed that God directed His intents to the larger wholes (or higher levels) affected by these quantum events. However, most scholars in this field also allow for God's action at higher levels, which then results in a top-down influence on lower levels, as well as quantum effects from the bottom-up.

In line with this, Peacocke (1993: 215) says that without argument, God exerts a-top-down causality on the world. In his view, God's action is a boundary condition or constraint on relationships at lower levels that does not violate lower-level laws. Generally, boundary conditions may be introduced not just at the spatial or temporal boundaries of a system, but also internally through any

additional specification allowed by lower-level laws. In human beings, God could influence the highest evolutionary level, that of mental activity, thereby modifying the neural networks and neurons in the brain.

Peacocke (1993:217) further maintains that Divine action is effected in humans down the hierarchy of natural levels, thus one has at least some understanding of the relationships between adjacent levels. He suggests that God communicates His purposes through the pattern of events in the world. Thus, one can look on evolutionary history as acts of an agent who expresses intentions but does not follow an exact predetermined plan. Moreover, he says, God influences ones memories, images, and ideas, just as ones thoughts influence the activity of neurons. According to Peacocke, Christ was a powerfully God-informed person who was a uniquely effective vehicle for Gods self-expression, so in Christ, God's purposes are more clearly revealed than in nature or elsewhere in history. In the authors view, Peacocke's idea seems to lean towards *process theology* or even the *openness view* of God discussed in the previous chapter, which relies on chance as the determiner of all future events.

As such, ideas of top-down causation are invoked by both Peacocke (1993:157-165) and Polkinghorne (1998:60; 1996:31-32), but in different ways. Peacocke speaks of the relationship between Creator and creation in panentheistic terms, placing great emphasis on the immanence of God who is

all the time creating in and through the processes of the world. According to him, these processors are themselves God's action and thus constrained to be what they are in all their subtlety and fecundity by virtue of the way God interacts with the world-as-a-whole. Sanders (2002:213), finds Peacocke's position to be "the most promising current theory", though he acknowledges that it operates at a high level of abstraction. Accordingly, knowing the interconnectedness of the world to the finest detail, one thus envisages God as being able to interact with the world "at a *supervenient* level of totality" - *holistically* - thereby bringing about particular events and patterns of events, i.e. His predetermined plan. To further expand on the concept of supervenience, Murphy (1996:23) states that it is a term coined by philosophers "to refer to the relation between properties of the same system that pertain to different levels of analysis". However, Murphy does acknowledge that there are a variety of definitions of supervenience, meaning that the term can be used to describe how higher-level properties supervene on lower-level properties but are not reducible to them. Thus, for example, mental properties can be said to supervene on properties of the neurological system; moral properties supervene on psychological or sociological properties.

Taking the above into consideration, Barbour (2000:170) states that if quantum events have necessary but not sufficient physical causes, and if they are not completely determined by the relationships described by the laws of physics, their final determination might be made directly by God. What appears to be chance—which atheists take as an argument against theism—may be the

very point at which God acts. Such interaction then, amounts to the input of information of a pattern-forming nature; the energy content of which can be vanishingly small so that there is no breach in the causal network of natural law. Indeed, it is a form of top-down causation that Peacocke prefers to call *whole-part influence*. Thus, in the view of Murphy (1996:20), Peacocke has made an important contribution to the dialogue between theology and science by suggesting that theology be understood as the science at the top of the hierarchy, since it studies the most complex of all systems, the interaction between God and the entire universe. Like Sanders (2002), Murphy believes that Peacocke has made an important contribution with his model. For Peacocke, his concern is always to interpret the world's happenings as naturalistically as possible, seeing this as a crucial task of theology in the scientific age. However, in the view of Barbour (2000:170), scientific research finds only law and chance, but perhaps in God's knowledge all events are foreseen and predetermined through a combination of law and particular divine action. Since God's action would be scientifically undetectable, it could be neither proved nor refuted by science. This would exclude any proof of God's action of the kind sought in natural theology, but it would not exclude the possibility of God's action affirmed on other grounds in a wider theology of nature.

Consequently, Polkinghorne (1998) also speaks of top-down causality through providing similarly energy-less *active information*, although he suggests

a more direct input into the world's processes – *chaos concept*. In the author's view, "chaos" is difficult to define. According to Gleick (1988: 306), of the chaos scientists he interviewed "No one could quite agree on a definition of the word itself". However, in the view of Polkinghorne, with the chaos concepts of *butterfly effect* and *strange attractor* in mind, it is conceivable that pattern-forming information can lead a system from one arrangement to another. Meaning, since any trajectory from one point within its strange attractor to another does not involve any change of total energy – thus Polkinghorne suggests, the Divine will could be exerted within any macroscopic part of the world's structure. Besides, he also believes that there is a greater dynamical openness for Divine agency via *chaotic* systems than simply through *holistic* operation on the world-as-a-whole. However, Bak (1997:31) has challenged this theory. According to him, the chaotic theory is not robust, since the critical state only occurs in the ephemeral interface between disordered and ordered states. Furthermore, chaotic systems tend to oscillate back and forth due to the strange attractor and cannot build up unique systems slowly over time. In Bak's (1997:31) words, "Chaos theory cannot explain complexity". However, according to Polkinghorne (1998:36), when challenged, macroscopic physical systems - even in their chaotic mode - follow deterministic equations and therefore cannot be expected to offer any room for manoeuvre. Furthermore, he states, the equations can be understood as estimations to true physical reality, applicable in only those rare and specific situations in which a system can be treated as totally isolated from its environment.



A question one could ask is: Could perhaps Divine causality function only through those who submit by faith to God. Meaning, if one renders their will to God believing that He knows best, one can then say that no violation of human freedom is forthcoming, since it was freely given over to God to do as He pleases. Thus, when one renders freely their will over to God, He can then exercise freely, top-down-causality through the person, to fulfil His will on the earth. Perhaps those who do not freely submit their wills, are not in God's will, so to speak, thus their prayers are not necessarily answered, specifically if it is not part of God's providential plan for their life and others? Therefore the bottom-up causality will still affect their course of action, thus God's Divine will is still coming about throughout creation, even though uncommitted minds or mental processors are in the equation. Thus, to sum up, one could present it as follows:

God could, in a sense, place laws of determinacy into cells at the quantum level. From this a *determined emergence* could occur throughout the different levels till it reaches the mental states (see Murphy 1996:23). From this mental state, ideas could emerge – one could call them *God ideas* (see Barbour 2000:170). It is at this level that one could either determine or reject, by an act of free-will, to go forward with the emerging ideas to bring about changes in the natural realm of reality. For Murphy (1996:25), this is where top-down *action* occurs; when human volition is involved. Consequently, this brings about the

necessary causal changes with the capacity to influence that which sustains its very existence - the natural realm. Thus one has the combination of upward determinism and downward causation. This then brings about human experience which then changes and adjusts human nature as God would have. One could in a sense say that prayer is the causal joint to start the process of bringing about His will on this earth as the person praying, to a large degree, is rendering their will to a higher power.

But despite all that has been said, the question of whether God answers specific prayer still remains unanswered. Could it perhaps be that God is not that concerned with prayer as a means of fulfilling His will on this earth, as His will is already predetermined as assumed throughout the above discussion?

The only answer at this point is to say that as one submits to God, so the ideas and desires regarding what to pray, subtly come on a person's thoughts through emergent properties determined by God at the quantum level. Thus, when one prays those ideas and thoughts that emerge, one is, in a sense, praying God's determined will on the earth, and as a result, things begin to change in the physical.

However, there is an alternative view that need discussion, and that is: could one say that God rather requires prayer simply to bring inward peace and contentment to His people? This is particularly relevant if God's predetermined

plan will come to pass regardless of any outside interference, especially when it comes to humanity's free-will? In this vein the following is a breakdown of this alternate view.

## **5.8 Is Prayer only a Means of Inward Change?**

Moltmann (2001:247-249), who breaks with monotheism and embraces a Hegelian form of panentheism (see Heiler:1958), contends that one can no longer pray *to* God but only *in* God, i.e. in the spirit of God. Accordingly then, one reinterprets prayer rather as *soliloquy*; reflection on life or meditation on the ground of being. Some theologians (see Tillich1957 & Schleiermacher1963) believed that prayer should only take the form of gratitude, resignation, or meditation rather than a petition to alter the ways of God. In other circles, prayer is interpreted and understood as a consciousness-raising experience which brings one into tune with the infinite. This is very much in line with the findings undertaken by Green (1993:2752) and Sloan et al (1999:664-667), who stated that those patients who had a high expectancy for the effectiveness of prayer to reduce anxiety, anxiety levels were indeed reduced and may also be effective buffers for the stressors associated with various medical conditions.

What these researchers, in the author's view, fail to recognise is that prayer is an essential element in the totality of Christian living, especially regarding intercessory prayer. Paul writing to Timothy states the following in I

Timothy 2:1-2, “I urge that supplication, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions”. While no sharp distinction can be drawn between “supplications” and “intercessions”, petitionary prayers are offered on behalf of others. But this does not, unfortunately, answer the question of whether God heals at ones request, or at the request of others, as in intercessory prayers offered on behalf of others?

To answer this, one would first need to determine how a miracle would or could take place. However, this is a complex question, which can lead to different results depending on how this question is approached. One of those approaches, according to Lewis (1947:1), is by experience. However, in his view, “...the question of whether miracles occur can never be answered simply by experience”. For Nichols (2002:711), miracles usually occur within a context of faith and prayer, but one would not want to limit God’s miraculous activity only to contexts of faith and prayer. For example, Erickson (2001:432) writes that some theorise that miracles recorded in the Bible were probably a suspension of natural laws (a view rejected by Lewis as will be shown in the following section). An example of this is the case of the axe head that floated (2 Kings 6:6). The theory suggests that briefly in time, in that cubic foot or so of water, a suspension of the law of gravity came about. In effect, God turned off the law of gravity until the axe head was recovered. The problem with such examples is that breaking such laws of nature, usually introduces complications requiring a whole series of compensating miracles. For one thing, there is no hint in the

narratives that if God suspended the laws of gravity to float the axe head, how would everything else connected to the miracle react? In the following section the phenomenon of God, nature and miracles will be researched.

## **5.9 God, Nature and the Miraculous**

For Lewis (1947:5), the word *miracle* is defined (in his words “rather crudely”) as an influence with nature by supernatural means. McDowell (1999:662) expands on this by stating that a miracle is defined as a special act of God in the world. As a consequence of this, miracles can only exist where there is a theistic God who can perform such acts. Thus, the first question one would need to ask within the context of this study, is: How do the natural sciences perceive the miraculous, if at all?

Firstly, from a biblical perspective, according to Lewis (1947:11-15), “What naturalism cannot accept, is the idea of a God who stands outside nature and made it”. Thus for many natural scientists, miracles are impossible, as in their view, nothing can come into nature from the outside – to cause a miracle – as there is nothing outside to come in. However, even if one admits that God exists and is the author of nature, does that mean that miracles, by right of God’s existence, and that He created nature, must or even can occur?

God, in the view of Lewis (1947:71), might be a being of such kind that it is “contrary to His character to work miracles. Or, He might have made nature the sort of thing that cannot be added to, subtracted from, or modified”. If this is the case, one then has to approach miracles from one of two views. The first being, the character of God excludes miracles. The second being, nature itself excludes miracles.

To begin to unpack this complex subject to reach a reasonable conclusion, one would need to start with the second approach discussed, that being, nature itself excludes miracles. For Lewis (1947:75), “Nothing can seem extraordinary until you discover what is ordinary”. What Lewis is correctly saying here is that if one rules' out the supernatural, one will *perceive* no miracles. Equally valid is that one will *perceive* no miracles until one believes that nature works according to regular laws, a simple but profound example is given by Lewis (1947:75). If one has not yet noticed that the sun rises only in the East, one will not see anything miraculous if the sun rises one morning in the West. If miracles were offered as events that normally occur, then the progress of science would render beliefs in miracles gradually harder to accept, and finally impossible to accept.

Returning to the first view that God’s character might exclude miracles, Lewis (1947:77) writes, “It seems reasonable to suppose that the Creator was specifically interested in man and might even interrupt the course of nature for

his benefit”. However, the question one now needs to ask is: Can nature be known to be of such a kind, that supernatural interferences are possible? Furthermore, if one grants the existence of a power outside of nature, is there according to Lewis (1947:88) “any intrinsic absurdity in the idea of its intervening to produce within nature, events which the regular ‘goings-on’ of the whole natural system would never have produced”.

From a theological perspective, one could say that when miracles do occur (whether that is an answer to prayer for healing or any similar related requests) natural laws are countered by supernatural forces (see Lewis 1947:59-61).

In this view, the laws of nature are not suspended, but continue to perform. In the process a supernatural law is introduced, negating the affect of the natural law. There are two other possible ways, other than those given by Lewis, of understanding how God may act in a miracle. The first is the traditional way: God responds to prayer, faith, and holiness. If a person or group of persons of holiness and faith pray to God for a healing, God may respond.

A second way is this: Perhaps God’s activity, or “energy,” to use a modern expression is always and everywhere available, like an extended field or supporting context. Pannenberg (1994:83), for example, argues that the Spirit of God may be viewed (analogically) as a dynamic field, a field that can be

accessed only by those who open themselves to God in faith, holiness, and prayer. The first model, in the view of Nichols (2002:712), envisages God's action in terms of personal response; the second, represents it as a field or context phenomenon; the field is always present but only some access it. One could say that both of these models are necessary to understand miracles, just as both particle and wave models are necessary to understand subatomic particles or the nature of light. The models are complementary, and either one without the other is incomplete. The first model explains the fact that many miracles do seem to be responses to prayer, but by itself it is open to the objection: Why then does God not heal everyone who prays? The reason may be, that to access the Divine energy, a person must surrender to God in faith and prayer, as previously stated, and that few people are doing this, hence the author's previous question; "Did the people involved in the experiments have a believing trusting faith in God?" It is not that God plays favourites and rewards those who grovel. It is rather that those who are not deeply surrendered to God cannot access God's power because they are not "keyed in." For God to act fully in ones life, one would need to be receptive. If there is Divine activity in miracles, however, can one explain how it influences physical processes?

For Lewis (1947:92), the natural sciences state that a miracle is a form of doctoring or tampering with the fixed laws of nature. Meaning that a new cause is introduced, namely a supernatural force, which the scientist has not reckoned on. However, if the laws of nature are necessary truths, then no miracle can



break them. But no miracle needs to break them according to Lewis (1947:93), as a miracle is *with* nature. Lewis again uses a simple but deep analogy to demonstrate this. If one snooker ball shoves another, the amount of momentum lost by the first ball must exactly equal the amount gained by the second ball. However, and this is the anomaly that natural science has not factored in, the laws of motion do not set the snooker balls moving: they analyse the motion after something else, in this case a person with a snooker cue – or perhaps what supernatural power has provided. The snooker balls provide no motion they simply state the pattern to which every event - if only it can be induced to happen – must conform. Thus it is inaccurate to define a miracle as something that breaks the laws of nature, it does not. Lewis (1947:93) correctly states that if God destroys or creates or defies or even pushes a unit of matter (as in the analogy of the snooker ball), He has created a new situation at that point. Immediately, all nature places this new situation in its realm, and adapts all other events to it. Thus the new event finds itself conforming to all the laws of nature.

To sum up this section, if events come from beyond this realm, they will cause no inconvenience or discomfort to the natural realm. The moment the miraculous enters the natural realm, it obeys all the laws of nature.

However, at present, one has to admit that it is difficult to understand the mechanisms of a miracle, and one wonders if it will ever be possible to understand the working of a miracle fully. As such, from a science and theology

viewpoint, Nichols (2002:712) offers that it may be that God acts at the quantum level, as proposed by Barbour (2000:170), as the determiner of indeterminacies. Quantum states, which are indeterminate, are determined by Divine activity to influence physical processes as presented through the theory of emergence. Robert Russell has proposed this model of Divine activity as a way of explaining theistic evolution and special providence (see Russell 1998). Although this might account for an accelerated healing, it is hard to see, however, how it could account for more dramatic miracles like the resurrection.

One could answer this question in broad terms by saying that theologically, and even logically, God cannot be completely separate from the created order. If God was transcendent, God could not influence the world in any miraculous way, and the world could not influence God through prayer and petitions. This is not the Christian idea of God; rather it is the deist idea - a result of viewing the universe as a self-enclosed mechanical system that leaves God on the outside. God's essence is to exist; God is the *act of existence* from which all other existent things draw their existence. There is therefore continuity as well as a discontinuity between God and creation. Rahner (1965: 53–61) has advanced the notion that matter/energy and what theologians call *finite spirit* exist in a kind of continuity. If so, (finite) spirit (such as the soul), could influence matter (or laws) directly, and God, in turn could influence the soul. (This is how Aquinas explains the resurrection). Nichols (2002:713) though, argues against this, and states that God never acts as one force alongside other physical

forces. Rather, God acts in creation immediately to empower nature to transcend itself. Therefore, according to Erickson (2001:434), there should really be no problem when one faces events that run contrary to what natural laws dictate. For Lewis (1947:98), a miracle is emphatically not an event without a cause as has been shown, or without results. Its cause is the activity of God: its results follow according to natural laws. Nature has the capacity to produce miracles, like a woman has the capacity to produce children. However, like nature, the woman cannot produce a child on her own, she needs outside help. Likewise, nature needs an outside or supernatural force to produce a miracle: the capacity for miracles is there.

Of course, twenty-first century science is more likely than was the twentieth century to recognise natural laws as merely statistical reports of what has happened. From a purely empirical standpoint, one has no logical grounds on which to base whether the course of nature is fixed and invaluable, or whether it can be successfully opposed in order to bring about the desired results expected, specifically when one prays for a miracle. Thus again the question arises: How much influence does prayer have in shaping the reality and the destiny of those who pray?

One view, according to Hannah (1979:347), is that although prayer is a form of meditation and reflection, it is also a means of sanctifying grace. It results, in his view, in altering the person, i.e. it affects the person's spiritual

maturity. Calvin (1970:146-147) expands on this by eloquently arguing that prayer changes the one who prays.

The necessity and utility of this exercise of prayer no words can sufficiently express. Assuredly it is not without cause our heavenly Father declares that our only safety is in calling upon His name, since by it we invoke the presence of His providence to watch over our interests, of His power to sustain us when weak and almost fainting, of His goodness to receive us into favour, though miserably loaded with sin, in time, call upon Him to manifest Himself to us in all his perfection. Hence, admirably peace and tranquillity are given to our conscience; for the straits by which we were pressed being laid before the Lord, we rest fully satisfied with the assurance that none of our evils are unknown to Him, and that He is able and willing to make the best provision for us.

Dabney (1972:716) simply writes, “Prayer is not intended to produce a change in God, but in us”. To argue that prayer changes the one who prays is most likely not to be challenged. It is readily apparent that people change when they spend time with God. Hodge (1979:91) states:

The Scriptures assure us, and all Christians believe, that prayer for material as well as for spiritual good is as real a means affecting the end sought as is sowing seed a means of getting a crop, or as is studying a means of getting learning, or as are praying and reading the Bible a means of sanctification. But it is a moral not a physical cause. Its efficiency consists in its power of affecting the mind of God and disposing Him to do for us what He would not do if we did not pray.

Although one would not disagree with these views, Packer (1997:29) clearly and rightly addresses this contentious area of God's providence and healing in the following way;

Petitions for healing or anything else, are not magic spells, nor do they have the effect by putting God under pressure and twisting His arm...Non Christian's prayers for healing may surprise us by leading to healing; Christian prayers for healing may surprise us by not being answered that way. There are always surprises with God. But with God's children 'Ask and you will receive' is always true, and what they receive when they ask is always God's best for them long-term, even when it is a short-term disappointment. Some things are certain, and that is one of them.

In concluding this section, one may again ask, what is a miracle, whether that is around healing or any other suspension or alteration of natural laws, to a scientist and to a theologian? Miraculous events might, of course, simply be illusions; events that are really fabrications, coincidences, or the results of some mysterious power of the mind or an unknown law of nature and not of any Divine activity. In other words, there are no miracles; theologically speaking, there are only unusual events. This of course, is a hypothesis, that remains to be proven. But if part of the cause of a miraculous event is Divine providence, then to a scientist, a miracle, whether that be a supernatural causal event, or a healing taking place within a person, will appear simply as an inexplicable event; a mystery that seemingly goes beyond what can be explained by natural causality.

If on the other hand a suggestion is made for Divine providence, miracles should then be of interest to all those who are trying to understand how God acts in the world. To the believer then, the providence of God is not an abstract conception. It is the believer's conviction that he or she is in the hands of a wise and powerful God, who will accomplish His purposes in the world, whether the prayer for healing or any other need is answered or not.

In the following section the question of humanity's relationship with God's Divine providence will be explored. The departure point being how this providence relates to humanity and the affect it has on personhood and in shaping the future. The first issue is how personhood is shaped through consciousness, and how this in turn affects the surrounding reality of life itself.

According to Peterson (1999:298):

Self-consciousness under various construals can mean consciousness of a self as distinct from others, the ability to objectify oneself in one's own consciousness, thinking about one's own thoughts, thinking about the facts of one's own consciousness, consciousness that one is a narrative self, and so on. It is usually argued that self-consciousness is a thing, that one has or not but a more careful analysis suggests that self-consciousness is a range of abilities and that even human beings have differing ranges of self-consciousness, and that people have different levels of self-awareness at any given time, depending on their mood, intelligence, education, and the like.

One would need to explore these issues as they have a direct bearing on how one makes a causal connection to God. Of course, this in turn would then reflect on issues such as prayer, freewill and how responsible and accountable a person is in shaping their own future. As a result, this then leads to questions of how much of God's providence is tied in to how a person acts and engages events that are inclined to shape their lives. For example, does God cause events to come across people's paths to move them in the direction that He desires? If this is the case, what impact does this have on shaping personhood, consciousness and destiny, and how accountable is one if this is so?

#### **5.10 Personhood and Human Freedom**

A most obvious and very important point of intersection between science and theology, according to Polkinghorne (1998:49), lies in the accounts they give of human nature. Men and women are a part of the physical world but distinguished from other entities by their possession of self-consciousness and - from a theological perspective - by their openness to encounter with Divine reality. Physics, biology, anatomy and physiology, psychology, sociology and theology are all disciplines that have something to say about the nature of humanity.

As such, Hefner (2000:73) states that one achieves personhood through acting upon the physical, biological and cultural materials one has inherited. This

in turn establishes a centre of identity that shapes those materials into an understanding of oneself, and how one relates to the surrounding world.

Although one would have little objection to Hefner's view, many questions that one can relate to shaping personhood - whether asked directly or implicitly by contemporary cultures - can be logically answered by the Christian world-view of humanity. Therefore the correct way to address the shaping of personhood is to start from the premise that humanity did not have a beginning as such, for beginning refers simply to the fact of coming into being. Thus, according to Erickson (2001:497), to speak of the "beginning of the human" is merely a scientific type of reference to this fact. He argues that the word "origin" however, connotes the purpose of this coming into being.

A Christian world-view does not therefore ask how humans came to be on the face of the earth, but why, or what purpose lies behind their presence here. The perspective of human *beginning* gives little guidance regarding what humans are or what they are to do. A Biblical framework, on the other hand, gives a clearer and more complete understanding of emerging human nature and its purpose.

To begin this argument for a Christian world-view on emerging humanity, one has to ask: "If who we are is at least partly a function of where we have come from, the key to our identity will be found factually in that God created us".



Humanity thus came into existence because of an intelligent Being's conscious purpose and plan. One's identity then is at least partially a matter of fulfilling that Divine plan.

As such, Erickson (2001:511) puts forward that humanity has no independent existence. They came into being because God willed that they should exist and acted to bring them into being and preserve them. Humans are part of the creation, but not, as humanists preach, the highest object in the universe. For all the respect that humanity has for itself, and the special recognition that they accord to humans of distinction or accomplishment, one must recognise that life, abilities, and strengths, have been given by God to these people of distinction.

In saying this, humanity, in most cases, consistently refuses to believe, according to Rigby (1998:47) that what happens to them is a matter of sheer chance. They rather prefer to believe that they shape their own destinies. Therefore, what happens in their lives, in their view, is a direct result of their own choices and actions. Broadly speaking, one could call it a Darwinian outlook on life. They surmise that no volitional powers other than their own are active in their lives or in the world as a whole. Ironically, many of these people who have not found it reassuring to conceive of God as the author of destructive events, have sometimes held God partially responsible. This is either in His absence in

intervening in destructive events or they have consequently accused Him of orchestrating the event.

Yet many view the idea that God is the governor of the events in the universe with great suspicion. Reasons for this are that it seems to supplant the agency of human beings. One could ask: If God is ultimately in control of all things, what role do humans play in shaping history, and for that matter, their own lives? If God has decreed an event for a person, then is it possible for that person to choose anything other than that decreed by God? This leads to the question of Divine freedom and sin. If a person is unable not to sin because God has chosen that the particular person will sin to further His purpose, can they be held responsible for their actions? To answer this, an understanding of top-down causality needs to be explored.

In the view of Peterson (1999:291), the conscious mind seems an excellent example of an emergent reality that affects top-down causation. On the one hand, much of the activity of minds one can describe in terms of its neural correlates, as images derived from CAT and PET scans dramatically display. In a Phenomenological way however, ones actual conscious mind, operate on ones own level of reality and readily engages in decision making, questioning, and other activities, which in turn affect in various ways the environment that surrounds a person. The changed environment in turn affects a person, and one goes through the cycle again. The higher-order events of ones mind thus

impinges on lower-level events (the motion of a car), which then affect the very mind that caused the set of circumstances to come about.

## 5.11 Freedom and Sin

This freedom to think and engage the surrounding reality that one has consciously created, leads to the question of how much good and evil is inherent in one's consciousness, and how does it affect the surrounding reality?

One could answer this by saying that with the new level of complexity that self-consciousness allows, new levels of both good and evil are now realisable, as history has well shown. In this sense, one may still speak of physical and of moral evil, and indeed, one may speak of moral evil as an emergent form of physical evil.

This raises the question of how much of God's providence is involved in how one acts, and is God the cause of sin, since He is the creator of humanity and all that goes with it. To explain this, Clarke (1961:237-240) does not hesitate to use the term *determinism* to describe God's causing of all things, including human acts. He offers several points in elucidating his position on this.

- Whatever God does is just and right simply because He does it. There is no law superior to God which forbids him to decree sinful acts. Sin is

transgression of, or want of conformity to, the law of God. But God is “*Ex-lex*,” He is outside the law. He is by definition the standard of right.

- While it is true that it is sinful for one human being to cause or try to cause another to sin, it is not sinful for God to cause a human to sin. The relationship of humans to one another is different from God’s relationship to them, just as their relationship to God’s law differs from God’s relationship to it. As the Creator of all things, God has absolute and unlimited rights over them, and no one can punish him.
- The laws God imposes on humanity literally do not apply to Him. He cannot steal, for example, for everything belongs to Him. There is no one to steal from.
- The Bible openly states that God has caused prophets to lie (e.g., 2 Chron 18:20-22). Such statements are not in any sense incompatible with the biblical statements that God is free from sin.

The problem with Clarke’s view is it questions the very nature of goodness itself. Erickson (2001:456) rightly states that God took sin and its effects on Himself. It would be contradictory while knowing that He Himself would become the major victim for sin, God allowed sin to occur anyway. The Scriptures are clear that human sinfulness grieved God (Gen 6:6). While there is

certainly anthropomorphism here, there nonetheless is indication that human sin is painful to God.

One way theologians have tried to reconcile God's providence with the presence of sin and evil in the world, and the authenticity of God's desire to exist in relationship to His creation, is by arguing that God limits Himself, an area discussed in the previous chapter with regard to Open Theism. In choosing to be limited, God is operating as an omnipotent being whose options are so unlimited that God can even choose limitation. While this explanation upholds God's reputation as omnipotent, it, at the same time, supposedly accounts for God's failure to eliminate evil and God's capacity to be in relationship with humanity. Evil exists because God has chosen, at times, not to exercise Divine power. God can exist in relationship to humanity because God has chosen to take on limited human flesh (in the form of Jesus), and become like His creation.

Although this answer seems plausible, it lacks a realistic point of view when it stands side by side with the Biblical account of how God views sin, and how He dealt with it through Christ. Young (1954:216-217) proposes a more Biblical view of this dilemma, he argues that the answer to this problem from the Christian point of view can be stated rather simply. Since it is the Biblical teaching that God created all things good, the explanation of the problem of evil, both moral and natural, must be found in the fall of man. Not only man but the whole creation has felt the effects of man's original rebellion against his Creator.

Natural evil exists under the permissive will of God just as moral evil does. The fall of creation, like the fall of man, must be viewed, not as something which God could not prevent, but as something which He must permit in the light of His eternal purpose. This again leads one to the question of God's providence and human action.

### **5.12 God's Providence and the Sinful Acts of Humanity**

Erickson (2001:423) argues that even the sinful actions of humans are part of God's providential working. Probably the most notable instance of this is the crucifixion of Jesus, which Peter attributed to both God and sinful men: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross" (Acts 2:23). One could argue that only the handing over of Jesus by Judas, rather than the crucifixion, is represented at this point as part of God's plan. The point is that what sinful humans did, was considered to be part of God's providential working.

In 2 Samuel 24:1, David is said to have been incited by the Lord to number the people; elsewhere David is also said to have been incited by Satan to commit sin (1 Chron. 21:1). Another reference sometimes cited as evidence that human sin is part of God's providential activity is 2 Samuel 16:10. David remarks that Shimei is cursing him at the Lord's command. This is in the form of

a hypothetical statement (“If he is cursing because the Lord said to him, ‘Curse David”), but in verse 11 David categorically states, “Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to.” In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul declares that Satan deceives “those who are perishing... because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” Then he adds, “For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so they will believe the lie and so all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness” (vv. 10-12). Here it appears that Paul is crediting what Satan has done to the work of God as well.

At this point one must address the difficult problem of the relationship between God’s working and the committing of sinful acts by humans. It is necessary to distinguish between God’s normal working in relation to human actions and his working in relation to sinful acts. The Bible makes clear that God is not the cause of sin. James writes, “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed” (James 1:14). John states: “For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does, comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 John 2:16). But if the sinful actions of humans are not caused by God, what does it mean when one says that they are within his governing activity? Strong (1907:423-425) states there are several ways in which God can and does relate to sin: He can (1) prevent it;

(2) allow it; (3) direct it; (4) limit it, or (5) punish it. Note that in each case, God is not the cause of human sin, but acts in relationship to it.

1. *God can prevent sin.* At times He deters or precludes people from performing certain sinful acts. When Abimelech, thinking that Sarah was Abraham's sister rather than his wife, took her to himself, the Lord came to him in a dream. He said to Abimelech, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her" (Gen. 20:6). David prayed that God would keep him from sin: "Keep your servant also from wilful sins; may they not rule over me" (Ps 19:13).

2. *God does not always prevent sin.* At times He simply wills to allow it. Although it is not what He would wish to happen, He acquiesces in it. By not preventing the sin humanity decides to do, God makes it certain that humanity will indeed commit it; but He does not cause them to sin, or render it necessary that they act in that fashion. At Lystra Paul preached that "in the past, He [God] let all nations go their own way" (Acts 14:16). And in Rom 1 he says that God gave people up to impurity, dishonourable passions, a base mind, improper conduct (vv. 24, 26, 28). In 2 Chron 32:31, one reads that "God left him [Hezekiah] to test him and to know everything that was in his heart." These were concessions by God to let individuals perform sinful acts that were not His desire, acts that they could not have performed had He so decided. This is



probably put most clearly by the Lord in Ps 81:12-13: “So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices”.

3. *God can also direct sin.* That is, while allowing some sins to occur, God nonetheless directs them in such a way that good comes out of them. This is what Stauffer (1955:207) has called the law of reversal. Probably the most dramatic case of this in Scripture is the story of Joseph. His brothers wished to kill him, to be rid of him. This desire certainly was not good; it was neither caused nor approved by God. Yet He allowed them to carry out their desire, but with a slight variation. Reuben urged the other brothers not to kill Joseph, but merely to throw him into a pit, thinking to free him later (Gen. 37:21-22). But then another factor entered. Midianite traders came by and the brothers (unknown to Reuben) sold Joseph as a slave. None of this was what God had wished, but He allowed it and used the evil plans and actions of the brothers for perfect good. It is stated in Gen. 39:2, “The Lord was with Joseph”. Despite the schemes and lies of Potiphar’s wife and the lack of faithfulness by the chief cupbearer, Joseph became successful and through his efforts large numbers of people were spared from starvation, including his father’s family - Joseph was wise enough to recognise God’s hand in all this. He declared to his brothers: “So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt” (Gen. 45:8). And after the death of Jacob he reiterated to them: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen. 50:20).

Peter saw that God had in like manner used the crucifixion of Jesus for good: “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). Paul spoke of the Jews’ rejection of Christ as the means by which reconciliation came to the world (Rom. 11:13-15, 25). One must recognize here the amazing nature of Divine omnipotence. If God was great and powerful, but not all-powerful, He would have to originate everything directly or He would lose control of the situation and be unable to carry out His perfect purposes. But God is able to allow evil humans to do their worst, and still carry out His purposes.

4. Finally, *God can limit sin*. There are times when God does not prevent evil deeds, but nonetheless restrains the extent or effect of what evil humans and the devil and his demons can do. A prime example is the case of Job. God allowed Satan to act, but limited what he could do: “Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger” (Job 1:12). Later, the Lord said, “Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life” (2:6). Paul also reassured his readers there are limits on the temptation they will face: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Cor. 10:13). Even when God permits sin to occur, He imposes limits beyond which it cannot go.

### **5.13 Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, the idea of God's providence and how it relates to miracles, prayer, personhood and sin has been exhaustively examined. In the process the question was asked that if God's plan is settled and He will do what He is going to do, then does it matter whether one prays or not? The answer given is that God does require that humankind work in partnership with Him, and it was shown that God does require His people to pray, in order for things to come to pass.

The issue of healing was also addressed and the conclusion reached was that no empirical data, in the author's view, exists, to counter the claims of the scientific world that healings are not common today. Their test cases showed no significant healings in people that prayed or were prayed for. A case was then made for Divine healing from Scripture, but the question still remains unanswered as to whether God heals when people pray? In the light of this, Packers statement that petitions for healing or anything else, are not magic spells, nor do they have the effect by putting God under pressure and twisting His arm is correct. It was further stated that what Christians do receive when they pray is always God's best for them long-term, even when it is a short-term disappointment.

Research into God's providence and its relation to human freedom and sin was also undertaken, and it was argued that evil in this present world must not be thought of as something God willingly planned as an instrument of human punishment and education, but rather as something He permits because of human freedom. All evil must be seen as a possible consequence of the kind of world God willed to create. Although God certainly knew from eternity the kind of world which would result, because of man's wilful rebellion, He also knew from eternity that He would be able to bring all of His plans to pass in His own time. It was also argued that God is able to effectively use evil to bring many of His purposes to pass. Although evil is a product of human freedom and rebellion; from the Biblical point of view, it is never presented as something which is frustrating God's plans and preventing Him from carrying out His purposes in the world. God is always in control in spite of the present reign of evil, both moral and natural. Although there are still many unanswered questions, it is clear that God is in control of creation through His providential plans, and that His ultimate will for humanity will be realised in the end.

This leads to the question of, "What is the Ultimate End of Humanity?" a question that Science and Theology have been trying to answer ever since humanity became aware of its own existence. In the following chapter this subject will be explored, under the banner *Shaping Eschatology within Science and Theology*.