



## The Providence of God in the Theology of Irenaeus

If you were to visit Lyons in south-east France today you would be able to see the remains of the Grand Roman Theatre of Fourvière, which has been excavated and extensively restored since 1933. The theatre was built around 15 BC on a hill dominating a bend in the River Rhone. At first it could accommodate 5000 spectators, but its seating capacity was doubled during the reign of Hadrian (AD 117 to 138). Irenaeus, who lived in Lyons during the second half of the second century, would have known this enlarged theatre, probably in its heyday.

Although the theatre was originally intended only for the staging of comedies and tragedies, it was put to a morbid new use in AD 177, when a persecution against the Christians broke out in Lyons. A number of Christians were thrown to the wild beasts and died in the theatre.

Irenaeus was not present in Lyons as this persecution reached its height. He had come to Lyons as a young man to become assistant to Pothinus, an elderly man who was the pastor of the church there. Like Pothinus, Irenaeus had grown up in Smyrna in Asia Minor under the ministry of Polycarp, who had known the Apostle John. Shortly after the outbreak of the persecution at Lyons, Irenaeus had been sent by the church there on an errand to Rome. On his return he learned that Pothinus had died in prison. After a short interval, Irenaeus was elected as his successor, and remained in the post until his death in the early years of the third century.

In the preservation of Irenaeus it is possible to discern the providence of God. In the calmer years after the persecution Irenaeus was to become one of the early Church's foremost fighters against heresy and a valiant defender of the orthodox Christian faith. I want to examine his comments on the theme of God's providence in his work entitled, *Against All Heresies*.

The heresy which Irenaeus most especially opposed was Gnosticism.

This taught that there were several levels of spiritual being, and that the creator of our world belonged to a far lower level than the supreme Father of all. Irenaeus set out to refute this notion. One of his major emphases is that there is only one God, that our Creator is no other than the eternal supreme God, and that he is the same God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This one and only God it is who *'exercises a providence over all things'*.

These are the opening words of chapter 25 of *Against All Heresies*, Book 3:

*'The word "providence" means that God has advance knowledge of everything, because he himself has planned all things with careful forethought. It implies that God works advisedly; in his wise ordering of the world, he does nothing rashly: all is measured and appropriate.'*

Irenaeus goes on to compare God to a ship's navigator or helmsman. In his providence he is steering the world forwards to its appointed destiny. God is called the 'Director'. He is the One who sets the direction with a clear aim in view, and who so regulates things that the direction is maintained and the target achieved. Just as a horseman, an elephant driver, or a herdsman guide and control their animals, so God is the Rector, meaning the guiding controller of the universe. Irenaeus was convinced of God's absolute sovereignty, based on his absolute rights of ownership of the things he himself has made.

The first paragraph of this chapter ends with a reference to *'the Father, who exercises a providence over all things, and arranges the affairs of our world'*. The second part of this sentence suggests that God, with thorough care and deliberation, positions things and times events with precision. He secures a regularity in creation as opposed to a haphazardness, and guards his handiwork meticulously. In speaking of God's providence, Irenaeus employs a word which could be used in connection with the day's work. Perhaps we can paraphrase him like this: To be managing director of the universe is 'all in a day's work' for the Lord of all.

Irenaeus is clear that there is nothing outside the sphere of divine providence. Twice in Paragraph 1 he speaks of God's providence over all, and in Paragraph 3 God is called *'Ruler over all'*. This universal oversight is specifically stated to embrace *'our world'*. This is an important stipulation in the light of the Gnostic heresy which Irenaeus is opposing. The Gnostic supreme god was so transcendent that any contact with the material world was impossible. For human beings to relate in any sense at all to this god it was necessary to make a purely spiritual ascent which severed all connection with the material world, including, in principle at least, one's own body. Irenaeus, by contrast, proclaimed the comforting truth that in the very midst of the struggles of life in the body, in the world of concrete physical reality, we may relate to our 'Maker' and 'Father', confident that, even here, we remain in his almighty hand.

What this means in practice is explained in Paragraph 4 of this chapter, where Irenaeus writes, citing Jesus' words in Matthew 5:45:

*'God ... does benevolently cause his sun to rise upon all, and sends rain upon the just and the unjust.'*

He speaks of our *'enjoying his equally distributed kindness'*, and extols the divine generosity in the phrase, *'the dignity of His bounty'*. He refers to the *'so great benefits'* which God confers indiscriminately on all people. It is a friendly providence which God exercises. He is favourably disposed towards humankind, and lavish in his outpouring of kindness.

This does not mean that Irenaeus denies the anger of God against sin. Indeed, in this very paragraph it is the contrast between God's magnificent goodwill and human *'wantonness and luxury, in opposition to his benevolence'* which makes the liberal kind-heartedness of God so much the more worthy of high esteem, and which makes final judgement so obviously fair.

All people without exception, Irenaeus says, *'enjoy'* the divine benevolence. In the original language the word used here speaks of an active ingathering of the joyful consequences of God's goodness, rather than a merely passive and accidental, or incidental, benefitting from it. It means very deliberately to lay hold of something to make it entirely one's own. It could be used of reaping a harvest. Irenaeus uses the phrase in the context of speaking of God's future judgement on those who have enjoyed his present kindness, but failed to lead lives corresponding to the dignity which has been done to them. He paints a picture of selfish people greedily grasping for all the good things which God gives, but never pausing to praise or honour him. By his benevolent providence God advances the welfare of human beings, and in so doing, lifts them to a position of honour. How entirely appropriate, then, is judgement, where people respond with ingratitude. Indeed, for Irenaeus, judgement is an aspect of providence; it is part of God's wise ordering of the world towards its predestined goal.

This is all the more evident when we note that, in this context, Irenaeus links with God's universal providence our knowledge of God. He writes: *'It follows then, of course, that the things which are watched over and governed should be acquainted with their ruler.'* He is speaking particularly of God's rational creation, particularly human beings: *'They have understanding derived from the providence of God.'* This means that the tangible experience of God's providence in his benevolent and generous provision is something which men and women ought to take hold of to bring them to the knowledge of God. Irenaeus gives an example of how this has been known to occur:

*'For this reason certain of the Gentiles, who were less addicted to sensual allurements and voluptuousness, and were not led away to such a degree of superstition with regard to idols,*

*being moved, though but slightly, by his providence, were nevertheless convinced that they should call the Maker of this universe the Father.'*

That is to say, they were convinced that they should not make a Gnostic distinction between the Creator and the supreme god. The factor which gave rise to this conviction was the providence which they observed.

Irenaeus is insisting that, to all rational people, if they will but take unprejudiced notice, the very facts of order, purpose, harmony, security, provision, in this world, which are truly staring them in the face, are making the statement that there is but one God who rules and governs absolutely everything. Because of the ravages of sin, the educational effects of providence are rendered more tenuous than they would have been. Nevertheless, there is something moving, something soul-stirring, something exciting, even inspiring, about a purposefully and benevolently directed world, which ought to alert God's rational creatures at least to the facts of his existence, his unity, his omnipotent greatness, and his universal overruling.

He uses an illustration taken from his own time to drive home this point:

*'By way of parallel, shall not those who live under the empire of the Romans, although they have never seen the emperor, but are far separated from him both by land and sea, know very well, as they experience his rule, who it is that possesses the principal power in the state?'*

At the close of the chapter immediately preceding the one which we have been examining Irenaeus has exposed the stupidity of Gnosticism. By teaching that the supreme god is different from the Creator who, *'through his love and infinite benignity'*, has come within reach of human knowledge (an implicit reference to the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ), they end up dreaming of a non-existent being. The reason for this non-existence is that the Gnostic supreme god cannot hold communication with the human race, does not direct mundane matters, and *'does nothing either for himself or others; that is, he exercises no providence at all'*, and such a god, Irenaeus perceives is tantamount to nothing. Part of what it means to be God is *'to administer earthly things'*. It suggests that it is the business of any God worthy of the name to manage this world. A god who is so transcendent that he has no contact with earth is here dismissed as a non-entity.

Later on, Irenaeus does highlight the convenience of such a god: a Father who does not exercise a providence over our affairs is one who approves of all sins. That is to say, he sits back and simply lets things happen without taking any supervisory responsibility. The denial of providence is a denial of judgement.

Within Book 3, chapter 24, there is a further positive reference to providence. God is said to nourish us by means of the creation. This phrase conveys a beautifully personal impression. It pictures God as both mother and father of the human race, tenderly nursing and rearing his creatures, feeding us, with the same attentiveness that parents show towards a helpless baby. Just as fruit is preserved by turning it into jam, so creation is deliberately preserved for man's nourishment. God has sweetened his world so that its provision is palatable to human taste. He has lovingly built pleasure into human experience of the creation. There is a sense in which it is true for all people that life is sweet, that it is a joy to be alive. God's providence is indeed thoughtful and beneficent.

In another context Irenaeus turns to Jesus' words in Matthew 10:29-30 to draw out some of the detailed implications of God's providence: *'The very hairs of your head are all numbered'*, said the Lord.

*Irenaeus points out that 'all have not an equal number, but many thousands upon thousands are to be found with still varying numbers, on this account that some have larger and others smaller heads, some have bushy heads of hair, others thin, and others scarcely any hair at all.'*

Jesus referred to the role of God's will if even one sparrow falls to the ground. Irenaeus notes that, whether you confine yourself to one particular district or take in the whole world, you will find that a different number of sparrows were caught yesterday from the day before, and a different number again today.

However, *'every number of all the things which have been made, and which are made, is known to God'*, and *'every one of these numbers has, according to his providence, received that special amount which it contains'*. Irenaeus continues: *'Not one of the things which have been, or are, or shall be made, escapes the knowledge of God'*. Rather, *'through his providence every one of them has obtained its nature and rank and special quantity'*, and *'nothing whatever either has been or is produced in vain or accidentally, but with exceeding suitability to the purpose intended, and in the exercise of transcendent knowledge.'* He infers that *'it was an admirable and truly divine intellect which could both distinguish and bring forth the proper causes of such a system'*.

Two points are being made here.

*First, there is, in God's providence, a purpose to everything.* This is expressed both negatively and positively. Negatively, nothing happens *'in vain or accidentally'*. Nothing takes place without some foundational purpose and some proposed usefulness. Nothing simply appears: there are no chance events in God's world. Positively, everything happens *'with exceeding suitability'*. The original word used here means *'an adjustment to secure a fit'*. It would have been used of tightening a belt to secure, for example, a breastplate. The implication is that every event in the story of the world is a minor adjustment which God makes to keep his creation neatly tailored as a comfortable home for humanity. Every occurrence is a necessary modification, to maintain the world's fitness as the sphere for his display of benevolence towards his creatures. Moreover, every event happens with *'elevated harmony'*. Irenaeus is suggesting that, even when things, to our limited perspective, seem somewhat discordant, they are still all playing together under the leadership of the divine conductor, and all the while the universe resounds with the echo of the sublime exaltation of the Most High.

*Second, there is an aspect of providence which is mystery:* although God has reasons for everything which he does, we are not always able to discern those reasons. Irenaeus goes on to argue that to go delving to try to answer the question 'Why?' will often mean that we end up making fools of ourselves.

Irenaeus also regards the coming of Christ into the world as a singular example of the Father's providence.

He writes: *'For it was not merely for those who believed on him in the time of Tiberius Caesar that Christ came, nor did the Father exercise his providence for the men only who are now alive, but for all men altogether, who from the beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation have both feared and loved God, and practised justice and piety towards their neighbours, and have earnestly desired to see Christ and to hear his voice.'*

The juxtaposition of phrases here effectively equates the exercise of the Father's providence with the coming of Christ in the days of Tiberius Caesar. That was the act of providence *par excellence*.

Irenaeus' main point here is that this greatest of all providences was of timeless significance and impact. The coming of Christ at a particular point in time is the supreme evidence of the divine ordering of all the events of time. God does indeed rule over, and work through, historical events. It was no mere coincidence that Christ came in the time of Tiberius Caesar; this was, in the Father's purpose, the time (as the preceding paragraph says) *'when the fullness of the time of liberty had arrived'*. Irenaeus does not attempt to speculate as to why this should have been the appointed time: he is content to leave that question to the inscrutable, but infallible, wisdom of God. However, the wonder of this ultimate providence was that, though enacted at one time, though timely in the plan of God, it was timeless in the sense that its saving efficacy reached to every time: *'all who*

*from the beginning were his disciples' were, through Jesus Christ, 'cleansed and washed from things pertaining to death'.*

It is worth noting too that Irenaeus sees the providence of God in the coming of Christ as directed primarily towards believers. In using the word 'providence' of Christ's advent he is focussing especially on its saving virtue, and this, Irenaeus is clear, is for true believers only. The salvation of Christ's disciples finds its originating cause in the divine foreknowledge, which wisely ordered things so that the coming of Christ as Saviour took place at the appointed moment as the central event of all history.

For this reason the only God of all, the Creator of the universe, is known as '*the Father of our Lord*', and, Irenaeus insists, it is by his providence that all things consist and by his command that all things are administered. These two parallel phrases indicate two important aspects of Irenaeus' doctrine of providence. First, '*providence*' is paralleled by '*command*'. God exercises his providence by issuing the all-powerful word of command. Just as he spoke and all was created at first, so it is the almighty word of God which keeps all things in being, which orders the changing rhythm of the weather, which prescribes the loving oversight of all the intimate details of individual life, and which ratified the coming of Christ to save and his final work as Judge. And God's commanding providence is directed towards the safety of humankind in a sound world. Second, 'all things consist' is parallel to '*all things are administered*'. We have already observed that Irenaeus sees it as an essential attribute of any being entitled to be known as 'God' that he administers the earth. Here we find a clue as to what this means. The phrase '*all things consist*' is an echo of Colossians 1:17. It conveys the truth that God's providential administration of the world secures its reliability, its harmonious continuation. We do not live in a world which is totally unpredictable, entirely random, or unreliably fluid. The providence of God ensures the stability which makes it possible for human life to go on. And the God of providence is '*the Father of our Lord*'. The reliability of the world is, therefore, an image of, a pointer to, the security of those who are saved in Jesus Christ.

For Irenaeus, then, God is the undisputed King of the universe. His providence is benevolent, being directed towards human welfare. This applies in all the intimate details of life in this world, but especially in his provision in Christ for the salvation of his people. Divine providence itself has an evangelistic impact, so much so that the judgement of those who do not know God is perfectly just.

What are some of the practical implications of this study to our own situation as Christians today?

*First, like Irenaeus, we must get a hold on the assurance that God is in control, come what may, and that his providence is never without purpose.* Even when Christians are being thrown to the beasts in the theatre of Fourvière at Lyons, still God is the managing director of the world. Even when we are perplexed by our circumstances, God is still administering all things. We need not despair. We may not understand what his purpose is, but we do understand that there is a purpose.

*Second, we must rejoice in the obvious instances of God's providential furtherance of his own work.* We rejoice that Irenaeus was spared, when he could so easily have perished in the persecution of AD 177. We rejoice that we are spared to this day, when so many unknown dangers could have carried us out of this world already. We rejoice that the church still exists, that the gospel is still preached in our land today, even when the times seem so grim.

*Third, in God's indiscriminate benevolence to all men and women we may find, as Irenaeus did, matter for fervent praise.* We must always thank God for the generosity of his favour even towards this rebellious race of creatures which we represent.

*Fourth, we should preach the providence of God.* We must preach it evangelistically, using it as an argument with sinners in calling for their repentance, in urging them to turn towards the God who is daily so kind to them. We must preach it to one another as God's people. How we need to be

reminded that God is in charge. How it will put the brakes on our grumbles, and lift our understanding above the mysteries of this bewildering life.

*Fifth, we can find personal comfort in the thought that God's providence is especially tender towards his own dear children. The very hairs of our heads are all numbered; God nourishes us daily. We are safe in a hostile world for time and forever. 'Do not let your heart be troubled.'*

*Sixth, let us lift our hearts to the thrill of the fact that God's providential rule over all things centres in Christ. As Irenaeus saw, the God of providence is none other than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

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