

Dear Friend,

This is now the 12th article in our series considering the doctrine of God's providence. This month we are considering how God's providence relates to our work in all the roles we fill. Christianity, from its beginning, has had an enduring problem to which Christians have given a variety of answers. Since Jesus came to establish a "kingdom that is not of this world," then how are we as Christians to relate to this world and its concerns? The problem was clearly articulated to me by a freshman in college a number of years ago. At our weekly meeting we had paired up the younger students with either older students or Campus Crusade staff members. Our objective was to go onto the campus and find a student with whom we each might share the gospel. We were all to assemble back in our meeting place an hour later to share what happened and to pray together. I was paired up with Lesen. We found a graduate student studying in the student union who let us go through a presentation of the gospel. We had a polite conversation but he was not interested in talking any further. On the way back to the meeting Lesen said to me, "In light of the fact that people will go to hell without Christ, shouldn't all Christians drop out of school and quit our jobs and give all our time to sharing the gospel and helping people know and grow in Christ?"

That question has been asked and answered in a variety of forms for the past 2000 years. H. Richard Niebuhr, in his classic 1950 book "Christ and Culture" suggests that there have been 5 general types of answers to the question of how Christians should relate to the culture in which we each live. As he masterfully shows there are a large number of theological and biblical principles that come into play in answering this question, yet the doctrine of God's providence, it seems to me, has a particularly critical function to play. If I could state the question this way: Does God only care about saving people from hell and for heaven or does he also care about what happens to this physical world and the cultures that inhabit it? Since this world is "passing away" (1 John 2:17) and since "the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire" (2 Peter 3:7) then is the only thing that matters to God the salvation of his people out of that judgment? Does he really care about what happens in and to this present world and the societies which inhabit it?

I want to begin to look at how God's providence informs this question by returning to our basic text that teaches God's providence, Psalm 135:6: "The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths." What I want you to notice is that the immediately-following verses, vv. 7-9, tell us two things that God is pleased to do. "He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses. He struck down the firstborn of Egypt, the firstborn of men and animals. He sent his signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants." Verse 7 tells us that God is pleased to rule over and care for his creation. Verses 8-9 tell us that God is pleased to save his people. In other words, God is always working at two things, preserving and governing his creation and redeeming his people. God is not more pleased to do one thing over the other. He is pleased to do both things.

God governs and preserves his creation and he saves his people, in part, through the work of human beings. The apostle Paul shows the necessity of human participation in the work of redemption in Romans 10:14-15: "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear

without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” Humans must work at preaching in order for God to save his people. Additionally, the Scriptures regularly teach that God governs and preserves his creation through the work of humans. God restrains evil and rewards good behavior through civil government (Romans 13:1-6, Proverbs 21:1). God provides humans with food and other physical necessities by our own work (Prov. 20:4, 13, 27:23-27, 1 Thess 4:11-12). God cares for children through their parents (Matthew 7:9-11, 1 Thess. 2:7, 1 Timothy 5:8). God cares for aging parents through children and grandchildren (1 Timothy 5:4). God teaches wisdom to the young through parents (Proverbs 1:8-9, 2:1-8, 3:1-2, etc.). The list goes on and on. God is delighted to care for the world of human beings by means of the work of human beings. To borrow the title to a book by Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, “Your Work Matters to God,” because it is through your work in providing and preserving and governing that God provides and preserves and governs.

Whether you are stocking shelves in the grocery store or clothing store or repairing cars as an auto mechanic or writing programs for computers or changing diapers or mowing your lawn or picking product to put on a truck or milking cows or teaching Spanish or repairing roads or working in an emergency room—your work, whether you know it or not, is God’s work in caring for his world. No lawful work is useless or meaningless. It all matters because God is working through you. The work of the pastor or missionary is not more important than the work of the trash collector as both are doing God’s work, one in preserving creation, the other in redeeming creation. Thus all of us can rejoice in the work that God has given us to do in all the various capacities and roles he has assigned to us as we are participating in his work.

This was one of the most freeing things I ever discovered. Prior to understanding this fact I would regularly feel guilty about having to fix some broken thing in the house or to take time to plant flowers because I believed I was wasting my time on things that did not matter. However, I now see and rejoice in all the work I do, whether it’s creation work or redemption work, because it is all God’s work.

Doing God’s work with you,