

From Acorn to Oak

Who is God, and what is he like? Part 24: What is meant by God's Providence, and does luck have any part in it?

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What do you think of this development? You and a friend are members of the same club and have undertaken the assignment to plan and produce the club's big event of the year, typically a spectacularly festive occasion. One day you have a brainstorm and an exceptionally great idea emerges in your mind which you share with your friend who says, "That's fantastic! I've been scratching my head ever since we took on this project, and I couldn't think of a thing. This program will be the best ever in the history of the club!" The days and months evolve, and you find yourself taking on more and more of the tasks. Every time something needs to be done your friend is out of town, in meetings, or engaged in family responsibilities. You speak with him about this matter, but because you're good friends you take on his work as well and the job is completed.

Your friend's prediction turns out to be precisely on target; the club's consensus is that this was the best festival it ever had. You're feeling very good about the outcome when you overhear your friend telling some others about how glad he was that he had the idea, that it was a lot of work and took much of his time, and making many other comments leading people to give him much unwarranted credit for the outcome, which was due to you and all you did. Now, how do you feel?

Do you ever wonder if God feels that way when human beings attribute their acquisitions and accomplishments to their own skills, intelligence, diligence, and, a word we often hear even from Christians, luck? Many individuals, especially those who ignore God, fail to notice his involvement in their lives; they don't see all that they value, cherish, and count as good as gifts from him. As one wag observed, "Some people are born on third base and grow up thinking they hit a triple." God expects more from those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. (Luke 12:48; Matthew 13:9-16, 43)

In his Word we read that "[e]very good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." (James 1:17) We're also told to "remember the LORD your God, for it is he who *gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant*, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today." (Deuteronomy 8:18 italics mine)

Though they don't see it, due to being blinded by the devil (2 Corinthians 4:4) and having a veil over their minds and hearts that is only taken away by Christ (2 Corinthians 3:14-15), people who do not believe in Christ also receive their well-being from the Father. Jesus said, "He [the Father] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45) In Christian theology this benevolence is called common grace, the unmerited favor that the Father gives to all people, contrasted with special grace, the unmerited favor that the Father gives in and through Christ. Thus, nonbelievers did not "luck out;" even those with extraordinary wealth, fame, and/or authority—whatever they have that is good—is not from luck but from the Father, who either gave it to them or gave them the

resources to obtain it, whether they admit to being so blessed or not. If they persist in their unbelief and disobedience, this is “as good as it gets” for them. As Jesus said, “They have their reward.” (Matthew 6:2, 16)

God providentially cares for us and for all his creation.

In historic Christian theology these and other teachings of the Bible are part of what is referred to as God’s providence, his active and continuous caring and providing for his people and all else he has created. His providence involves at least two distinct features as described in *The Heidelberg Catechism* (Lord’s Day 10). First, he preserves his creation, continually upholding it to maintain it. (Matthew 6:30-34; Colossians 1:17; 1 Peter 5:7) Second, he governs his creation, directing and controlling it so that the freedom he has given the beings he has made must function within his predetermined limits. Nothing happens apart from his will, either his permitting or directing certain phenomena or events to take place, but he will not allow the evil propelled by sin to destroy his plans. (Psalm 22:28; 103:19; Proverbs 16:9; Matthew 10:29-31; Philippians 2:13) He guides his creation through the natural laws he has established and in other ways to bless and to ensure the accomplishment of his purposes. Sometimes he intervenes through miracles which he makes occur directly or by using natural phenomena at the needed time. (Deuteronomy 8:18; Psalm 104:20-31; Proverbs 16:9, 21:1; Acts 14:17; Exodus 14:21-22; Matthew 28:5-7; Acts 3:1-10; Romans 8:28)

David sang, “I was young and now am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed.” (Psalm 37:25) In Psalm 84:11 we also read, “the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.” Throughout the Bible believers remember God feeding his people manna and quail on the Exodus. The Psalmist reveals that God “makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts.” (104:14-15 TNIV) See also such texts as Psalm 104:27, 107:9, 111:5, 136:25, and 145:15. God also feeds the animals; see e.g., Psalm 146:7. When God’s people are hungry he feeds them. He has done this miraculously as on the Exodus but usually since Bible times by notifying the church of such needs. Individual churches, such as with World Renew, formerly the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, and Lutheran World Relief, and many Christian parachurch organizations, such as Samaritan’s Purse, World Vision, Luke Society, MAP International (Medical Assistance Programs), AMFA (Affordable Medicines for Africa) Foundation, and International Aid provide food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and other life-sustaining supplies as part of God’s provision for people in need.

Accordingly, a dear friend of mine, Rev. Bassam Madany, a native of Lebanon, has informed me that the Arabic translation, expression, of Providence is the Divine taking care of, i.e., God taking care of you.¹ And he does so in countless ways.

We who believe in and follow Christ know the Source of “every good and perfect gift.” (James 1:17) Let’s not fail to acknowledge and thank God for his abundant blessings to us!

¹ Bassam M. Madany in a phone conversation with the author on November 11, 2014. Rev. Madany for most of 40 years preached the Gospel of Christ in Arabic to the Middle East for the Back to God Hour radio broadcast.

Psalm 104:20-35

- ²⁰You bring darkness, it becomes night, and all the beasts of the forest prowl.
- ²¹The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God.
- ²²The sun rises, and they steal away; they return and lie down in their dens.
- ²³Then man goes out to his work, to his labor until evening.
- ²⁴How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.
- ²⁵There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number-- living things both large and small.
- ²⁶There the ships go to and fro, and the leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.
- ²⁷These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time.
- ²⁸When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.
- ²⁹When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.
- ³⁰When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.
- ³¹May the glory of the LORD endure forever; **may the LORD rejoice in his works**—
- ³²he who looks at the earth, and it trembles, who touches the mountains, and they smoke.
- ³³I will sing to the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
- ³⁴May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the LORD.
- ³⁵But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more. Praise the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Though God cannot be thwarted (Isaiah 14:27; Job 42:2), since he is the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17), won't thanking the Father add to his **rejoicing in his works** much more than referring to them as coming from "luck" or "being lucky?"
2. Does attributing something good to "luck" or "being lucky" not detract from the Father's glory?
3. Is not taking away from God's glory precisely what the Devil is constantly trying to do?
4. Is there a disconnect between praising God and then attributing anything good to "luck?" Can we add to our praise of God by thanking him for the good in our lives and avoiding use of the word "luck" and its derivatives?

While not overtly being done in God's name, governments supply food and other necessities when people encounter disaster. Government is part of God's provision for stability and order in this age where sin has caused such a negative effect on his creation. (Romans 13:1-8) While not nearly as effective as church organizations due to secular systemic evil, governmental agencies are still helpful. The Holy Spirit restrains the extent of evil, and God works through government organizations as part of his means of caring for his world while he is completing his redemptive process in his work in and through Jesus Christ to renew his creation.

“The law” in Romans 13:8 refers to the Mosaic law God gave his people, not governmental law. Verse 8 continues the reference to and application of God’s providential care for his world (“fellowman” > ἕτερον *heteron* > ἕτερος *heteros*, other, another, not just fellow Christians), referring here to God’s providence through his people, not the government.

Several years ago a challenging period occurred for my family and me, and yet not unlike many who read these words have experienced and much more so. Nevertheless, we gladly testify that God’s help is all-sufficient and enough, sometimes experienced immediately and sometimes after a while. Right from the beginning of the challenge his involvement was so evident I opened up a document on my computer’s desktop that I entitled, “Evidences of God’s Providence.” It was a working document on which I recorded specific related developments and their timing as they unceasingly occurred, to the degree that no reasonable person could conclude that they were due to coincidence or chance. In rapid succession over several weeks I listed more than 50! I then stopped counting but not marveling. This list is a striking illustration of Romans 8:28 (“we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”) and the many related texts in the Bible. Needless to say, as you’ve already been expecting to read, God brought that challenging period to a close in a way that our whole family saw was good, even very good.

God cares and provides for us in countless ways every day, most of which we are not even aware of! Consider just a few. He has directed drunk drivers to select an alternate route from the one we and our family were using, thus sparing us a tragic automobile crash. He has caused an airline mechanic to notice a vital repair that was required in order for our plane to fly safely. He led us to a home that was built by a contractor who did his work well and didn’t “cut corners,” failing to include necessary lumber and other materials in order to pocket the saved money or materials for himself. Especially when we ask God, he leads us to those who will provide sound and wise financial advice to more than meet our needs, though not necessarily to make us rich (which is fraught with dangers, e.g., as Paul explains to Timothy in his first letter).² He guides and directs those who manage, and the countless people who have any influence on, our financial portfolios. Do you have pain free breaths? If so, whom should you thank? Is your heart functioning well? Assuming you agree that cardiac well-being is good, have you thanked the Father? Have you had enough to eat? Thank God! (Psalm 34:9-10; 37:25-26; Proverbs 10:3; Matthew 6:31-34) If you are hungry, go to the church, the body of Christ, through whom God primarily works to accomplish his purposes.

² Paul writes, “Those who *want* to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, *eager* for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” (1 Timothy 6:9-10 TNIV) Certainly God has throughout history employed wealthy people in the accomplishment of his purposes. Yet the Bible indicates, including in this text (see the words I’ve italicized), that though there is nothing wrong with wealth per se, and it is a gift from God (e.g., it’s an implication of James 1:17), it is best not to strive for and prioritize that goal. In my own observation, a follower of Christ who becomes wealthy is likely one for whom money and other accumulations are more a means rather than an end in themselves. They consciously want their possessions and other assets to be for God’s use, and they pray that God directs them as to such use of their means.

This same God loves you just as much and stands ready to help you in accord with all your needs. What great reasons to be thankful not only on Thanksgiving but always! By keeping James 1:17 daily in mind (“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father...”), most times throughout the day when something good occurs I find myself saying in thought or somewhat audibly, “Thank you, most holy and most gracious Father!”

More Benefits for Us

I heard again today a man on television lamenting his lack of luck. He said, “My family and I just aren’t lucky.” I feel sorry for this man and his family. The implications of what he is superficially thinking are staggering! He’s not only wrong, but his viewpoint casts a pall of pessimism that is counterproductive to his and his family’s well-being and negatively affects others and their service for the Lord.

Think about it! First and foremost, it reveals an inaccurate view of God, including ignorance of him and his involvement in our lives. This viewpoint can, and often does, result in many people developing a worldview that fosters a feeling of being caught up in fate, a negative perspective that feeds a victim mentality and with no way out! Such a view, if taken seriously, followed to its logical though unsound (due to being based on faulty assumptions) conclusion, and acted on, leads to fatalistic discouragement, depression, and despair...and worse!

Observe the difference in what the historic Heidelberg Catechism teaches with its practical orientation to theology. It also emphasizes that acknowledging God’s providential care of his creation enables us to be patient in adversity and grateful in and for our blessings. We thereby grow in trusting our faithful heavenly Father for the future and in the assurance that nothing can separate us from the manifestations of his sovereign love that more than meet all our needs.

In the light of these realities how can any Christian use the word luck? Again, think about it. Words are loaded with meaning and powerfully impact our communication. God's calling to us who follow Christ is to be his witnesses; what kind of a witness for our triune God is that? Is not referring to something as luck actually attributing what is good to chance rather than being a “good and perfect gift...from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows?” Indeed, this quote from James 1:17 indicates that each good and perfect gift is from God, either directly or indirectly.

When he does so directly, he alone gives us these gifts, e.g., a good idea, without using any other means through whom or through which to transmit them. Not infrequently I pray for God’s wisdom and direction to help me answer a question for which I do not have an answer. Often the answer comes to me even before I’ve finished articulating the question in my prayer! I know the answer has come from God, because (1) I asked him for it; (2) the answer is good, in accord with James 1:17; (3) it’s consistent with his Word, the Bible; and (4) it typically involves thoughts I’ve either not had previously or of which I’ve not been recently thinking.

Indirectly, God gives us good gifts through others and through instrumentalities, such as medications that either heal or help us cope with illness. His indirect blessings also come from knowledge, skills, health, strength, and additional blessings he has given us that enable us to do

something we and others value. One more example of God's gifts given us indirectly is the help we receive from fellow believers and other humans, whose motivation to do so is from God, even when they don't realize it.

None of this is from luck! Thanks be to God!

Eyes to See the Deception of Luck

Consider another dimension of this issue. Consciously eliminating the word luck from our perspective and speech enables us to see more of God's blessings. The mentality shaped by the idea that good things come from happenstance (note the derivation of the root hap, chance) is on a collision course with Scripture, as we've observed above. By freeing ourselves from the premise that chance occurrences, e.g., "lucky breaks," account for the benefits we receive, we can much more easily see the many good things each day that come from God's loving hand.

Satan opposes God at every point, and the devil's objective is to try to remove as much glory from God as he can and to turn as many people's perspective away from God and God's work as possible. Can you think of any more effective way to accomplish this objective than to instill in human minds, even the minds of God's redeemed, the concept of luck with its unbiblical denotation and connotation of something good occurring apart from God? God has called us to be his witnesses. How do we witness effectively to the triune God, who is the giver of "every good and perfect gift," if we fail to mention the key dimensions of his very character? To whom then are we witnessing?³

God has called us to be his witnesses. How do we witness effectively to the triune God, who is the giver of "every good and perfect gift," if we fail to mention the key dimensions of his very character? To whom then are we witnessing?

The concept of luck is a demonically designed attempt to take away credit where credit is due. Not only is it for the purpose of trying to take away from God, detracting from his glory, but it takes away from human beings' share in the blessings God gives to people, such as the ability (e.g., skills, knowledge, gifts, wisdom) to accomplish objectives, tasks, and work. *How can one take pleasure in what he or she has achieved, and even consider it an accomplishment, if it is referred to as just "luck" or the result of "luck?"* Remember how you felt in the opening illustration, when someone else took credit for all your diligent work?

³ The operation of the Holy Spirit in a person's mind and heart is required for the new birth, the new nature, that enables one to have eyes to see and ears to hear. (Cf. Mark 8:18; John 3:3; 1 Corinthians 12:3) It is understandable how the world does not comprehend such matters, but the church should readily comprehend and "march to a different drummer." Pray for the unregenerate person so he or she can understand and make the necessary changes. Pray also for the church member who doesn't understand but also admonish him or her and urge more careful reflection and action.

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The concept of luck thus mitigates people's motivation, and it also misleads them concerning a sense of responsibility. If what we produce is just "luck," our motivation to set goals and reach them reduces accordingly. Furthermore, in a luck-saturated mentality, if people set goals and don't reach them, does not the idea of "luck" tempt them to avoid assuming responsibility for their lack of success? Have you not heard such excuses as "I guess I wasn't as lucky as he [or she] was?" How many fess up and admit to improper preparation? Not a few take the next step and conclude there are things they just aren't responsible for, because they aren't "lucky" enough. No room exists for such thinking in a Christian's sense of calling from God to serve him.

The self-professed atheist, columnist George Will who sometimes also refers to himself as an agnostic, also observes this connection between the concept of luck and the erosion of the concept of human responsibility. Reflecting on a commencement speech given by former Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels and now, at this writing, president of Purdue University, Will quotes and references Daniels as follows:

said Daniels, perhaps the most dangerous of today's many pernicious ideas is that "life is more or less a lottery. That we are less masters of our fate than corks floating in a sea of luck."

Of course, we observe flaws with the alternative Daniels mentions, that fate as it is typically used is an unbiblical concept, and humans "mastering fate" introduces additional concepts counter to the Bible, but we should not in the process lose sight of the important point Daniels is making. As we've seen in previous essays in this series, God is sovereign and rules over all; nothing occurs without his permitting it to take place, but he does not predestine all the events in a person's life. He expects us to trust him, walk with him, seek his wisdom and guidance, and obey him. He will bless our faithfulness, and we are accountable to him for how responsibly we use the resources he gives us. Yet Daniels observes too many people behaving according to a contrary worldview that results in counterproductive behavior, as Will continues:

Daniels quoted Thomas Edison: "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work." And Daniels cited his anecdote about Hall of Fame baseball player Eddie Murray:

“Once, after his wrong-field bloop double had scored a winning run, Murray was yelled at by an opposing fan who shouted, ‘You must be the luckiest hitter in baseball.’ To which Murray politely replied, ‘You must not watch batting practice.’”

Progressives understand that their program for a government-centered society becomes more plausible the more people believe that work—individual striving—is unavailing. Government grows as fatalism grows, and fatalism grows as progressivism inculcates in people the demoralizing—make that de-moralizing—belief that they are victims of circumstances.⁴

Many others say, “I don’t see how God has helped *me*; he hasn’t done anything for me that I can see. I’ve achieved all this through hard work and good luck, being at the right place at the right time, and having an extensive network; I know a lot of people.” It doesn’t take much thought to perceive that those who constantly talk about being lucky fail to see God’s hand in all their well-being. Such talk shapes their worldview, limits the light that provides understanding, and eclipses their perspective. Indeed, God the Father, the giver of every good and perfect gift, has been invisibly working in their lives to bless them and they’ve missed him! How sad, especially when His own covenant people use the language and thought forms of the culture which is heavily influenced by the “prince of this world,” as Jesus called Satan. (John 12:31; 16:11)

As for me I do not want to play into the devil’s hand; I don’t want to participate in his scheme to take glory from God. Rather, I want to glorify God in all that I do and facilitate the accomplishment of his purposes. Therefore, I refuse to use the word luck. It has been many years since that word has passed my lips, and as I continued to reflect on these matters associated with this word, I’ve found it very easy to not use the word luck or its derivatives; will you join me and help others to do so, especially those in the body of Christ, the church? Let us make pleasing, honoring, and glorifying God our greatest desire, objective, and accomplishment.

More Evidence of Satan’s Role in Deceiving Human Beings

We see Satan’s involvement in human affairs and his influential part in the human condition already early in the Old Testament beginning in Genesis chapter 3. Yet it’s Jesus who most clearly exposes the devil as “the father of lies.” (John 8:44-45) As such he deceives people, and one of his greatest deceptions is to depict himself as having the power to oppose God effectively, when in fact he can only do what God allows him to do. The Bible, God’s revealed and holy Word, discloses that Satan is no equal to God, who is peerless, and that Satan is only an angel who has fallen. (Luke 10:18) Satan is like a peanut contrasted with God. If you are looking for a peer of Satan, consider the other fallen angels, the demons, he leads. Contrast them with the righteous angels, including Michael and Gabriel, who point to and work for the triune God who has revealed all these realities in his Word, the holy Bible. Moreover, in and through Jesus Christ God, who is sovereign, has defeated the devil and his followers. (Revelation 20)

⁴ George Will, “Purdue has the president America needs,” *Washington Post*, reprinted in *Reporter-Herald*, June 16, 2016, p. 4A.

Yet, while Satan is defeated and “chained” (Revelation 20:1), like a vicious dog on a leash, he is still dangerous even for God’s people who thoughtlessly “play in his yard,” i.e., in the circumference of where the chain allows him to roam, within the area of his limitations, where he can tempt us. One illustration of where Satan works to influence the people of God is in our weak spots, e.g., fortune, fame, sexuality, and inclinations to allow affection, emotion, passion, to override careful thought. One way careless Christians allow the devil and his demons to deceive themselves and others and divert their attention from their high and holy calling from God is by not being careful in the choice of their words, as when someone talks of a child as “a cute little devil—Ha Ha!” In this attempt at humor at least three spiritual and theological errors emerge: the real devil and his demonic ilk are neither cute nor little, and this child is not a devil in any sense if he or she is a baptized child in God's covenant.

The devil also works in those areas among pagan people but in many other aspects of life as well. Almost anywhere in the United States we see people naming groups and places after Satan. The Garden State has a National Hockey League team called the New Jersey Devils. A suburban Chicago high school has as their mascot the Red Devils.

The city of Loveland, Colorado, the major eastern gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park, has a geological configuration in an open space heading into the Rocky Mountains that resembles spinal vertebrae. What's it called? It's been designated the “Devil’s Backbone,” clearly a misnomer: the devil, being a fallen angel, is a spirit who has no body, thus no physical attributes. Much more, Satan doesn't own that territory or any other, including the equally misnamed “Devil’s Gulch” in the northwest part of Lory State Park on Northern Colorado’s front range. The devil had nothing at all to do with creating, much less owning, these beautiful places in the lower foothills of the Rockies, but he did steer the people who either unwittingly or intentionally allowed themselves to be influenced to name these places after the father of lies whose primary goal is to take glory away from God who not only created but owns these parts of his universe and are part of the general revelation God has made of himself that he has built into his creation that point to him. Recall Romans 1:18-20:

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hinder the truth in unrighteousness;

¹⁹because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them.

²⁰For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, *even* his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse... (Romans 1:18-20)

Thus, we see that the words we use communicate significantly. We, especially those of us called to be holy to God in Christ Jesus, must exercise care in the choice of the words we use. We are called to be the people through whom the Holy Spirit will work to accomplish the redemptive purposes of the triune God. Let us be ever more conscious of this essential dimension of our identity, of who we are, and of Whose we are in our language and in all else we do. Our mission is to transform our culture, to be models to whom others look, not to be followers of those in our culture most of whom do not know Christ. (Matthew 7) As the apostle Paul wrote, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your

mind.” (Romans 12:2) The tense of the Greek verb translated transformed clearly indicates a command that is to have an ongoing application in the lifestyle of those who believe in and follow Christ. One very significant way to model a Christ-like manner in our terminology in our witness to him is to exercise more conscious care in the choice of our words, i.e., in what we say and don’t say.

Helping Ourselves and Others to Change our Thought Forms and Language

Many if not most people in our and other cultures use words without consciously thinking of their derivations. Thus, as Dr. Quentin Schultze, Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences at Calvin College, explains, when most people wish someone luck, they are simply saying “I hope all goes well for you.”⁵ Most either don’t know or aren’t thinking about the denotation of the word or even its connotations, they are simply using the word as they hear it in common parlance.

Thus, when we’re trying to help people avoid using the word luck, we should keep in mind what they are likely trying to say. In fact, we can be glad that they are at least indicating that they know that the good to which they are referring is a result of something outside themselves. They at least are not completely locked into the demonic and sinful hubris so characteristic of our world that they think they are the source of all that is good and to be desired.

Then, we can begin by not using the word, luck, ourselves. If you make it your intention to not use the word luck, and you find it slips out at times, don’t give up your intention; just remember why you want your language to be used for God’s glory and the accomplishment of his redemptive purposes. Then, ask God for help and redouble your effort to try not to say “luck,” or its derivatives, e.g., “lucky.” If you catch yourself saying the word luck in a conversation with someone else, you can turn it into an opportunity to teach or witness, starting by saying, e.g., “Whoops, I’m trying not to use that word.” At that point substitute another. If the person with whom you’re speaking asks you why you don’t want to use the word luck, you have a golden opportunity to explain. It won’t take long, and you’ll succeed. Moreover, you’ll be glad you did.

Even if he or she doesn’t ask, still say why. The idea of not speaking until people ask comes from pop culture; it doesn’t come from the Bible. God has not called us to be silent. To the contrary, he has called us to be his witnesses (e.g., Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 4:15; 1 Peter 2:9-12). Furthermore, we cannot assume we’ll have another opportunity. *Carpe diem!*

In such conversations I’ve been asked, “So what can I say instead of ‘Good luck?’” I respond, “How about ‘Best wishes!’” Or, better, say, “Good Providence!” However, all Providence is good, as it comes from God, who provides for his people, and he even helps those opposed to him. (Matthew 5:45) Yet, we have some experiences that we need, e.g., “wake-up calls,” circumstances that reorient us to God and his calling for us (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), that are not all pleasant, so you could also say, “Pleasant Providence!” whereby you are wishing someone enjoyable blessings from God. Therefore, you could also mention, “I wish you pleasant Providence!”

⁵ Quentin Schultze in a conversation with the author, June 26, 2014.

When someone says, “Luckily, I... (found this great deal, etc.),” how about asking, “Would you like a better term than luck, which doesn’t exist? How about saying “Providentially, I... (found this great deal, got this job, survived [or avoided] that accident, etc.)”?”

If we hear someone use the word luck, and if we have the opportunity (e.g., especially some time to talk and a reasonably good relationship with the person) we can say something to the effect, “I know what you mean, and thanks very much for the well wishes, but I wonder if there is a way to express that desire in other words that bring glory to God and convey a worldview more in line with the Biblical perspective.” Including the other person(s) in the answer to the question more fully engages them in the task, frequently results in insightful and innovative thoughts, and facilitates their motivation to continue the practice.

When someone wishes us “Good luck!” we can also say “Thanks, I know what you mean, and I appreciate it very much, but I don’t believe in luck—everything good comes from God.” Whenever I say that I don’t believe in luck, invariably the other person says, “I don’t either.”

Even many advertisers disavow luck. The day I’m writing this part of this essay, I received in the mail a flier from TruGreen, the lawn care company. In the first paragraph the ad says, “A beautiful lawn doesn’t come from luck. It comes from applying the right care at the right time.” To which I add, “I know Who gave the company the good ideas and the resources to make the product that will be applied to the lawn; Who created the earth on which the lawn is growing; Who gave the homeowner the ability to make the money to purchase the property to make and maintain the lawn; and Who gave the one applying the lawn care products the health, including strength, to do so.” And those are only a few of the blessings God has provided to make that lawn; luck had no part in it!

Matters that don’t turn out well are not “bad luck” but are the result of unpleasant circumstances brought on by our very selves or others, including demonic beings, though the latter typically work by influencing humans to accomplish their evil deeds. Sometimes we ourselves are “our own worst enemy.” Occasionally we are the victim of irresponsible actions on our own part, such as poor planning. We have no one to blame but ourselves, though it takes more strength than many have to admit it. On other occasions the neglect of one person causes painful circumstances for others. In either case, God sometimes allows occurrences that are the logical conclusion of choices we or others have made that are counterproductive to our objectives at the time; nevertheless, in God’s loving providential care he brings good out of ill for his people: Providence but this time an unpleasant Providence at least initially. They are still occasions through which God blesses us and in which we should give thanks (Ephesians 5:20; Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:18); they are opportunities to learn. For starters, we can ask ourselves, “What can I learn from this unpleasant experience? What do I need to do differently to avoid a repeat of this circumstance in the future?” Turn to God for his all-sufficient help. The concept of something being “unlucky” fails to take into account the Lord’s helping people learn what they need to know.

Of course, your relationship with the other person, how well you know him or her, and for how long you've known him or her, are indicators as to what you can say that will be most useful. As in all effective communication, strive for the healthy balance between sounding so strange, i.e., weird, that the other person writes you off on the one hand and ignoring God's call to be his witness in Christ on the other hand. Nevertheless, it is clear that morally and as Christ's witnesses we are to be "aliens and strangers in the world" (1 Peter 2:11), meaning our behavior and our words must glorify God and contrast with evil. God didn't place us where we are at this point in time to just talk about work, weather, and fun; he's given us a high and holy calling, and we are to respond by shaping our lives faithfully and accordingly. See 1 Peter 2:9-12 and 3:15. In 2:12 the apostle urges us "to live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." The original Greek word he uses for "see" means an ongoing and careful observing over time of how we who believe in and follow Christ live. The world is longing for someone to show them what Christ-likeness looks like. 1 Peter 2:9-12 emphasizes the deeds we do and 3:15 indicates that words are also necessary but are to be said with gentleness and respect. The above ideas are some easy conversational gambits to open doors for a more substantive witness for Christ, indeed for the triune God.⁶

As we proceed through each day with the growing awareness that everything we value, enjoy, cherish, and count as good has come from our loving Father in heaven, who is himself our greatest blessing and does not change, we'll recognize more and more of his work in our lives. We'll marvel and rejoice in his constant love for us, including its breadth and depth.

Does all this surprise you? Of course not. God takes care of, provides for, his people. Thus, you'll find yourself thanking him throughout the day for the good things as they occur and that you now more clearly perceive as coming from him, directly, or indirectly via others through whom he is working to bless us.

That understanding and thanksgiving is transformative. Consciously connecting what you see as good with God's blessings will cast a new light on your disappointments, discouragements, discomforts, and difficulties. Some will actually disappear and others diminish due to seeing them now in their proper perspective, i.e., within the control of God who is sovereign, good, and all-capable, who loves you, and who is working out all matters for your good and for the accomplishment of his purposes. Those that do not disappear, you'll see as manageable and not destructive. Gratitude, joy, encouragement, and hope will replace anxiety, worry, dread, pessimism, fear, and the sense of being overwhelmed by life as you more and more observe God's constant presence and countless expressions of his providential love for you every day. What great peace and joy we have not having to hope for "luck!"

When significant problems occur in our lives, tunnel vision typically forms, and we only see the problem. It helps greatly to keep a whole-life perspective and view the problem in its proper context, whereby we also see God's ever-present willingness and all-sufficient ability to help. We need to keep the broad view, including the present moment in an eternal perspective. One day I was mentioning this reality to one of my wife's brothers, Alan, and I said, "We have to

⁶ For more on luck and gambits for witnessing for Christ, see my presentation, "Gambits for Witnessing for Christ," on the Christian Witness page of my Web site at <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/christian-witness/>.

keep God in the picture.” He replied, “Yes, and he’s not only in the picture, but he’s holding the picture!”

It occurs to me that one way God has provided to help us keep him in view is to remember what James wrote,

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, *you ought* to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.” (James 4:13-15 NASB)

Notice in this passage that James does not tell us to avoid planning; rather he says that we should do our planning in accord with God’s will in the acknowledgement of his sovereignty. If we plan something that doesn’t fit in with his plans, and which only he can see would not be good for us or others, he may well interject some changes, and if he does our plans will be altered. We need to plan but, as we do, to keep in mind who we are and who God is. We’re here to serve him and his people and accomplish his purposes. We’re not here to serve ourselves and accomplish only our purposes. Nevertheless, in God’s marvelous manner, he rewards us with the reality that when we put him and his kingdom first, he gives us all we need and much, much more as well. When we take delight in him, including doing his will, he even gives us the desires of our hearts! (Psalm 37:4)

All the ministers in the denomination that holds my ministerial credentials are members of a church organization called a classis. The classis is like a presbytery in the Presbyterian churches. It is composed of a group of churches in the area, and the ministers in that classis are accountable to it. I remember, when I was a young minister many years ago, receiving just before the time our classis would meet, a letter informing us of the next meeting, and it would conclude with the date and the initials D.V. (*Deo volente*, God willing) beside the date. I said to my wife, “Isn’t that silly that they have to make that designation! Everyone knows we’re not meeting if it isn’t God’s will.” I was wrong; everyone doesn’t know that, and far fewer do today. First of all, that statement was in accord with James’ teaching. Secondly, we need those reminders to keep our perspective, to remember the context in which we serve, and to make our plans most effective...including most lasting. If we’ll do what the Holy Spirit led James to write, and say, e.g., “Lord willing, I’ll see you next Tuesday,” or “I’m leaving for Chicago tomorrow, Lord willing,” we’ll more readily see God at work in our lives...each day!

John Newton, one of England’s extraordinary pastors, wrote to and of his deep love for his wife, Mary. While on an extended voyage at sea, when he was captain of a ship before becoming a minister, he penned, “You will not be displeased with me for saying, that though you are dearer to me than the aggregate of all earthly comforts, I wish to limit my passion within those bounds which God has appointed. Our love to each other ought to lead us to love him supremely, who is the author and source of all the good we possess or hope for. It is to him we owe that happiness in a marriage state which so many seek in vain, some of whom set out with such hopes and prospects, that their disappointments can be deduced for no other cause, than having placed that high regard on a creature which is only due to the Creator. He therefore withholds his blessing (without which no union can subsist) and their expectations, of course, end in

indifference....” He clearly perceived the need to keep the gift in proper perspective, thereby honoring the Giver and more fully appreciating the gift. Having such a perspective on life and the Biblical view of who God is and what he is like, and who humans are and what human nature is like, reduces the likelihood of and protects us from devastating disappointments.

When Mary died, John Newton said in his sermon at her funeral: “I considered her as a loan, which He who lent her to me, had a right to resume whenever He pleased; and that as I had deserved to forfeit her every day, from the first; it became me, rather to be thankful that she was spared to me so long....” Perceiving all of life in the light of God’s providential care of his creation, and of himself and his wife in particular, Newton was well positioned and prepared for the struggles of life he encountered, including the loss of his dear wife. We, too, live within this Providence. Thanks be to God!

When Carol, my precious wife for over 48 years, died, I, who throughout our marriage always had that same Biblical and theological perspective as John Newton articulated, have been thereby greatly strengthened and enabled to come through this very difficult experience as well as I could have hoped. God blessed me, the rest of our family, and a multitude of others in countless ways through her. I can clearly see limitless evidences of God’s Providential care just in preparing her and me for her death; upholding her and me, and the rest of our family, through it; and caring for me and for the rest of our family as well as Carol’s other loved ones while we are apart from her presence.

Oh what a wonderful wife God gave me; luck had nothing to do with my finding her and her becoming my wife. I couldn’t have asked God for a more magnificent wife than Carol, whom he gave to me in gracious response to my numerous and fervent prayers. At this writing it has been several years since she died, and I still have times of sadness each day. When the tough moments come, I thank God for my cherished Carol; for the 53 years we knew, had a special relationship with, and enjoyed each other, especially for the almost five decades as husband and wife; and even for taking her to be with him where she no longer has the struggle with the debilitating disease that afflicted her. She belongs to him, as do I, the rest of our family, and all others in Christ. He has the right to bless her as she needs in his all-surpassing love...for her and for me. Shortly before she died, she told me, and a friend who was visiting with her, that she wanted to go home to be with the Lord; two weeks later God granted her request. Even in my weepy times, I can only thank God for these realities, for all the treasured moments we had together, and for the supreme joy that she is having in God’s eternal presence and service and that in and through Christ Jesus we will be together again—next time forever—and my spirit soars! Thanks be *to God!*⁷

⁷ For more ways to see and experience God’s loving hand and all-sufficient help in the difficulties we daily encounter in life, see my essay, “Preparing for Living Again as an Unmarried Person” and the accompanying video, entitled “Managing Grief: Thanking God in and for Everything,” in the Marriage page of my Web site at www.fromacornotoak12.com. The video can be accessed either by clicking on the link in the essay or by opening it up by clicking on its title on the Marriage page where it can also be accessed by itself.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Meditate on and mention some of the ways God has provided for and blessed you already today.
2. What percentage of our personal and corporate (congregational) prayers is given for thanking God for his all-sufficient provision for and care of us? What should the percentage be?
3. Concerning the concept of “luck,” what can you do to help people see instead the triune God’s loving Providence?
4. God didn’t tell the government to feed the poor, but he did tell the church to feed the poor. How should we best accomplish this task?
5. Referring to Deuteronomy 14:25, what can you say to the highly educated people in our time, who lack knowledge and especially wisdom, how the ancient Egyptians could perceive the LORD and his help for his people, but that they can’t see him today?! What are some implications for us and our witness to them?