

Florida Baptist Historical Society
MONOGRAPH

March, 2025

George W. Truett on Providence

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Published by the
Florida Baptist Historical Society
Graceville, Florida

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George W. Truett on Providence

George W. Truett, perhaps best known for his advocacy for religious freedom, was the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas from 1897 to 1944. His regularly broadcasted nationwide sermons proclaimed salvation could only be found through Jesus Christ. Truett emphasized repentance and God's grace.

Truett, a Baptist legend, was a wartime pastor who served as a chaplain in World War I and preached extensively during World War II. When he preached, people listened. Quietly and humbly, he dedicated his heart to his mission work, as seen by annually attending retreats to share his faith with cowboys in rural Texas and the Southwest.

Today, people easily access Truett's work via compiled sermons and conference recordings. Although Truett wrote no theological books, people inarguably overlook his teachings on the doctrine of providence. How involved is God with creation? Does God's will shape events? Truett regularly covered such questions and their responses in his preaching and teaching. While perhaps never intended, Truett remains a figure to study within the concept of divine providence.

What is divine providence?

George W. Truett might not be considered a well-known theologian by today's standards. However, one can firmly argue that any preacher, especially an influential one like Truett, was indeed a theologian. Truett's legacy is best described as that of a preacher, evangelist, and Baptist leader. Truett was well-educated and biblically sound in theology. His sermons taught the Bible's contextualization within systematic theology. His preaching of providence and God's will often recognized God's sovereign control over creation. A discussion can easily be made that one of the most profound impacts Truett had on his congregation was the teaching of divine providence.

In theology, divine providence is the concept that "God cares for His creation, is involved within creation, preserves its existence, and guides its intended end."¹ In other words, God is active with His creation and is involved in all past and present moments. This view inevitably separates theists from the deists.

While the view of providence tends to further divide Protestant Christians within the debate of Calvinism and Arminian theology, it does not have to, as both acknowledge God's providence and sovereign control over mankind. Further, both branches of Christianity deny deism and ascertain God is the ultimate Creator, Judge, and authority figure of all history.

Providence, though similar to the concept of sovereignty, is typically referred to as the act of carrying out God's will. Sovereignty is "God's rule and authority over all things."² The contention is then made that providence derives from God's sovereignty, where creation plays a role in God's sovereign control to carry out His will. In simple terms, mankind is an instrument of the Divine to fulfill His desired outcomes. This position was undoubtedly Truett's, who preached frequently on providence within the context of God's ultimate plan for creation.

Divine Intervention

In a sermon appropriately titled, "God's Providence In Life," Truett shared, "You have been delivered from sickness serious and finally you have been rescued time and again from the

emergent crisis that came upon, how wonderful has been the providence is of God in all our lives this noon day on the fact that as little thing as a dream is an illustration of the intimate providence of God in our life."³ Discussing Matthew 27:19, Truett relayed Pontius Pilate's wife's dream, a divinely sent warning about condemning Jesus to death. The verse explicitly shares the account, "Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." (Mat. 27:19) Truett preached, "The dream was attended by great anguish... This woman may have seen it all. It was a dream of such a moment that she suffered unspeakable language and she sent her messenger with all heat to warn her husband."⁴

Through divine intervention, God provided insight into the deity of Christ to a woman whose husband was about to agree to crucify Him. Truett's lesson emphasized the intercession of God within creation through a dream and the connection to ultimate salvation found in Christ. Yet, the sermon was not limited to divine intervention within Pilate's wife; it also referenced Peter denying Christ three times, a prediction made by the Lord Himself. Truett continued, "He [Peter] denied his Lord the three times as Christ said he would and now he's gone away and John the beloved John and the other disciples in those awful hours gathering about Jesus have forsaken him."⁵ Truett's message underlined God's involvement in creation, knowing past and future events to come. He argued that if anyone denied God's involvement in creation, look no further than the Scriptures, where God's deity and presence were known to each generation. He also pointed out God's intervention methods, "Oh, how wonderful our God's methods for reaching man by the intimacy and the searching revelation of his own overruling province."⁶

Not only does God use methods such as dreams or prophecies in Peter's case, but Truett conveyed souls are used as instruments to fulfill God's will. As was the case with Joshua, leading him not only to battle but reassuring His (God's) intervention in the process. Truett explained:

So Joshua, the Lord says to him now arise, Get over Jordan into the land. I've appointed for my people. You'll find difficulties. Many, you'll find wall cities, you'll find enemies, You'll find giants of opposition and strength. Go right on, go right on, be not afraid. And remember, as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee! I will not fail thee. Nor forsake thee.⁷

Truett correctly pointed out providence correlated to God using Joshua as a great military leader and as a tool to achieve God's will, sharing God's pre-determined plan that the land of Canaan would be the Israelites' and victory was the final outcome. God's providential dealings affected military battles and the destruction of pagans in the land of Canaan.

God never promised a mission free of trials, tribulations, or sorrow, but what He foretold was success. Joshua recognized this through sincere faith. Truett continued with Joshua's logic of scoping out Jericho before battle, "There are grave difficulties, but we are well able to overcome because God has sent us. And God has a mission, a commission for us, and in his name and by his power, we are well able to overcome...One man with God is more than 10 big fields full of men without God. One man with God is in the majority."⁸ According to Truett, God's providence in life can uplift men's courage and bravery, as it did for Joshua and his trusted partner, Caleb.

Truett's message relayed the importance of being a soldier and servant of Christ, knowing His will is carried out by the church in all aspects of life. He noted Christians are called to be "evangelists and representatives in a world torn by tyranny and world disorder."⁹ Trusting in providence required a "Kingdom First" mentality. Truett shared, "Let his glory be that transcendent thing in your life."¹⁰ Using Oliver Cromwell as an example, he taught Cromwell's assurance to his Army was that in crisis and danger, his men could only rely on faith in God and His divine providence, and regardless of the outcome, trusting in God was necessary for comfort and understanding.¹¹ Here, using both Joshua and Cromwell as examples, divine providence dictated outcomes to God's will. Truett did not back away from the reality of struggles, hardships, and defeats, but emphasized that both Joshua and Cromwell overcame vanquish and tribulations through faith in providence.

Yet, not everyone knew God's intention or purpose in life. Truett acknowledged this was okay: "Often, we are led along providentially, gloriously, without any realization of being led. As we pass out of the dark woods or cross the swollen streams, we find ourselves in a land of flowers and music. Glory is our surroundings in every way, and they inspire us and fortify us. God has a plan for every life."¹² Truett's most impactful teaching on providence was carrying out God's will in daily affairs. This often prompted the question, "How does one carry out the will of God?" Truett pointed to obedience in faith and Christ. Know the Lord through the Scriptures and pray earnestly for His direction and guidance. Adhering to providence allowed God to dictate the rest.

Thy Will of God

The idea of providence includes God's complete sovereign control. Truett commented, "The will of God is supreme. The will of God is to be solid."¹³ Adding, "George Washington said, "If we ignore God and disregard the precepts of God, the nation is on the downward turn [from] the will of God."¹⁴ Known for always sharing "Thy Will" of God in many of his messages from the pulpit, Truett always taught morality and that mankind's principles must be Christ-centered and derived from the Scriptures.

A society without Christian ideals and customs is a nation deemed to destruction. This held true in wartime messages, where Truett argued during the Second World War, "I've wondered if, in the providence of God, he hasn't allowed this great war to come down with its dark, desperate story and experience to come down; I have wondered if he hasn't let it come on the world, that Christian people might see, "You can't get on without me. You've tried to, and you've made a shipwreck of it. You can't get on without me; you can't get on without me."¹⁵ Truett correctly correlated war to God's judgment and providence. Biblical accounts supported his position that every famine, disaster, or war took place at God's mercy and providence. In the end, God uses nations for His intended purpose, whether it is judgment or deliverance from evil. Wars could confront oppression, and wars could bring liberation.

Not only did war showcase the sovereign control of God, but it also had a tendency to bring improvements to civilization, notably from Christians. When disasters or wars broke out historically, Christians often answered the call to service but also repaired what was broken. Truett shared:

A great fire is often followed by repairs and renovations and improvements and better conditions for the people. And so is it with a great flood; time and time

again, the great flood-carrying destruction to both life and property-has been followed by improvements and safeguards for the people to follow in the wake of such a disaster. A great epidemic of sickness is often the occasion for the most painstaking and thoughtful and careful preparation that such epidemics shall not occur again, or if they do, shall be abated, shall be greatly reduced by what scientific, and other preparations may make against such visitations. Even so, a war-cruel and inhuman, merciless and bloody as it may be-may often be attended by certain collateral blessings, which you would do well to remember.¹⁶

Known as a patriotic, religious liberty-loving preacher, Truett never separated Christianity from that of freedom and democracy. Truett's logic was justified, as he believed vehemently that freedom and life in Christ centered on liberty within all aspects of life, including government control. He argued, "Patriotic liberty, loving humanity, loving God, honoring people know that some things are more precious than life and they are ready to give their lives in defense in the perpetuation of those priceless treasures... One of the loftiest passions in the human heart is patriotism."¹⁷ Patriotism, connected directly to biblical freedom, "Freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom, freedom, and its noblest sense the great bible doctrine, which is the very heart of the bible that God has clothed every individual in the world of every race, cream, condition, and circumstance."¹⁸

Truett knew well that God ordained nations and their leaders, both those practicing darkness and those seeking righteousness. He argued, "We are under God we're under his authority; we're under his Dominion. We are under his guidance and government and he governs by great principles of righteousness."¹⁹ Only righteousness, judgment, and Christ can confront war. Truett ascertained, "Christianity must have the field, Christianity must have the feel the world is lost without it."²⁰ While souls continue to struggle to find out the concept of God's pre-ordination or ordaining of governments, many of which are anything but Christian, Truett found this easy to answer. God uses darkness as a judgment and a learning mechanism to call for repentance and turn to Him (God) for understanding and, most earnestly, salvation.

Providence through Great Leaders

Nations could either work with Christ or cease to receive His blessings. However, leaders, too, play an essential part in God's divine providence. Comparing Winston Churchill to the leaders of Scripture, Truett argued that all leaders are "merely servants in the hands of God, a mere tool."²¹ He preached:

Not a man, no matter how great, no matter how big, no matter how good, no matter how tremendous, God is the true source of people's health, that's the biggest lesson in life to learn. That's the supreme lesson in life to learn... When God displaces a man when he empties a place, he'll have somebody else.²²

For the leaders who understood this, it brought forth great humility. When Moses died, Joshua replaced him as not only a man of God but an influential leader for the Jews to follow. God's providential care impacted leadership, and a reliance on godly men to carry out the biblical message of the Gospel. Truett considered General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson a prime example of the Christian faith:

God's will is always right and safe and best. General Jackson, dying under Chancellorsville, had exactly the right to word to say to the surgeon and the others that came around him wounded, you know, to his death one of his own man. He was the calmest man in that little group. As he lay under the shade of the trees dying at Chancellorsville. The doctor was greatly disconcerted and nervous. And so were the officers. And General Jackson quietly said, Why be calm man? If I live, it will be for the best. And if I die it will be for the best. God knows, and directs all things for the best for those who trust him and love him? And I trust him, and I love him, said the great Jackson, and he went on to be with God.²³

Truett argued Jackson understood providence, that God ordained all events, whether joyous or sorrowful. Acknowledging providence and sovereignty under God's control produced comfort, wisdom, and a peace of understanding that only Christians could comprehend. Going deeper in another sermon, he taught, "He's the [God] overruling intimate, never failing providence in our life...A little sparrow falls to the ground except by the father's permission and you're of much more value than many sparrows."²⁴ Quoting Scripture, Truett brought in Jesus' teachings on God's sovereign control: "He reminds us that if God clothes the grass of the field which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven will not much more clothe you. Oh, you have a little faith. God watches over us is overruling providence is marvelous."²⁵ Leaders come and go, argued Truett, but what the great biblical figures and those in history had in common was a deep reliance on providence. Truett regularly quoted and admired the likes of Oliver Cromwell, Jonathan Edwards, George Washington, Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Charles Spurgeon, noting they all were great leaders, relying solely on God and submitting to His will in their lives. The common theme of providence is centered on submission.

Providence and Suffering

Divine intervention was evident in every part of life, from personal leaders to conflicts and prophecies. It also played a part in understanding suffering, which Truett admitted all pastors were often asked about. Truett shared, "Why? Why? This question is often asked and oftentimes is thrown into the face: You are suffering, Sir, because you have done wrong. You have sinned."²⁶ However, Truett believed this was a poor answer, and that it was often misrepresented.

Truett explained, "Often suffering comes for the good of the sufferer. The highest conception of life is that it is a school. Suffering, then is disciplinary. Suffering is educational. Suffering is a part of our training for the battles and experiences of human life."²⁷ Truett argued that suffering brings forth character, as was the case with Martin Luther, who recalled suffering further built him as a man of God. Suffering occurs to families, individual people, and entire nations. But all suffering had something in common: the reality of understanding and reliance on God. Truett taught, "Let us mind how we behave. Let us go through the dark way with our eyes fixed immovably on God, and our trust in Him... glorifying God in the dark and cloudy day with face marked by tears but with lips charged with confidence and trust attest so that all may know that God is glorified. Trouble is a trust for the glory of God, and let us bear it as such."²⁸

Truett argued suffering could produce "bitterness and more rebellion" or alternatively result in "faithfulness and submissiveness."²⁹ God's providential care for mankind was intended to build up the spirit of Christians, even in times of distress. Truett continued, "Suffering is often for the

good of the one called upon to suffer."³⁰ Quoting the Apostle Paul, "But we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope."³¹

Truett could never separate lessons in life from providence. If providence was the events and affairs correlated to God's divine plan, then all lessons mattered, good and bad. Truett always acknowledged the fallen nature of humankind and the abundance of sin in the world, but he also observed that this darkness could constantly be confronted and defeated through righteousness, particularly the glory of Jesus Christ. Suffering, disease, and destruction exist, but for Truett, they all are part of God's plan of redemption and sovereign control intended to point creation to the work, life, and salvation found in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Determining George W. Truett's specific theological positions presents a challenge. The esteemed pastor did not publish theological books or compile in-depth studies on systemic theology. However, he did preach, and he preached from the Word of God and addressed the most serious theological questions, such as the concept of divine providence.

One could argue that God's majesty, power, and ultimate providence were addressed in almost all of Truett's sermons to convey a message of salvation correlated to God's will. He frequently used "providence" or "Thy will" as sermon titles. The influential leaders Truett often quoted shared similarities and complete submission to God and His will. God was an active Creator, Truett argued, one that sought entire submissiveness and attention. Whether it was from a dream, heading into battle, enduring a disaster, or facing an illness or death, divine providence played a role. God's intended purpose for each soul's life is deliberate and intimate, showcasing His sovereignty and love for creation, notably in those who followed Him.

Great biblical figures and modern Christian leaders shared a common trait: they excelled when their faith was tested. They carried out God's will. Truett brilliantly pointed out the one prayer Jesus Himself not only shared but ordered His disciples to emulate (The Lord's Prayer) highlighted God's sovereign control and providence, with such petitions as "Thy will be done, lead us not, and deliver us." God is an active Creator who expects His sheep to follow Him in faith and action, seeking His will at all times in life. Truett taught understanding God requires examining others' lives and your own, a concept he correctly understood as providence.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 162.

² Ibid., 187.

³ George W. Truett, *God's Providence In Life*, (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX), <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/gods-providence-in-life-art-thou-also-one-of-his-disciples-w-3224/727972?item=727973> (accessed February 5, 2025).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ George W. Truett, *Go Bravely On – I Will Not Fail Thee*, (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, November 30, 1941), <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/go-bravely-on-i-will-not-fail-thee-november-30-1941/727659?item=727663> (accessed February 5, 2025).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² George W. Truett, *The Prophet's Mantle Volume 1*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), 70.

¹³ George W. Truett, *Christ's Methods In The World*, (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX), <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/the-power-of-choice-christs-methods-in-the-world-w-3203/727827?item=727829> (accessed February 5, 2025).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ George W. Truett, *Philip at Samaria* (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, March 16, 1941), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed February 5, 2025).

¹⁶ George W. Truett, *The Lord Reigneth* (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, December 14, 1941), <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/the-lord-reigneth-december-14-1941/727669?item=727673> (accessed February 6, 2025).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ George W. Truett, *God Provides Leaders* (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX), <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/god-provides-leaders-conquest-of-fear-w-3205/727841?item=727842> (accessed February 6, 2025).

²² Ibid.

²³ George W. Truett, *God's Will Be Done* (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, February 9, 1941), <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/gods-will-be-done-february-9-1941/727513?item=727515> (accessed February 6, 2025).

²⁴ George W. Truett, *Ye Are Not your Own* (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, November 8, 1942), <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/ye-are-not-your-own-november-8-1942/727764?item=727767> (accessed February 6, 2025).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ George W. Truett, *The Salt of the Earth Volume 4*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), 70.

²⁷ Ibid., 71.

²⁸ Ibid., 73.

²⁹ Ibid., 74.

³⁰ Ibid., 71.

³¹ Ibid.