

What can the Church Expect?: The Protection of Providence

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Introduction: How the Westminster Assembly Itself Reminds Us of This Truth

In this study of what the Westminster Confession teaches regarding the providence of God with respect to his care for the church, it would be helpful to remember that the assembly that produced this document serves as an example of this truth. For the Westminster Assembly was itself a work of God's special providence.

The assembly, which met primarily from 1643-1648, did so during the English Civil War. King Charles I, under threat from advancing Scottish armies and without the funds he so desperately needed, convened what became known as the Long Parliament to secure the help of the British gentry. Little did this king realize – one who claimed to rule under the divine right of kings – how deeply the Divine King would put into the hearts of those in Parliament a desire for reform throughout the kingdom. Indeed, so great was the reform that the Parliament, supporting Oliver Cromwell, would eventually see Charles himself driven from office and his eventual execution in 1649. Their actions sowed the seeds of a more constitutional monarchy in the United Kingdom seen even to this day.

Yet the Parliament's yearning to bring the nation out from under tyrannical oppression did not stop simply with political change. In the midst of all the intensity of a civil war, the Parliament called for godly ministers throughout the land to come to London to reform the church as well. Here is the opening of their appeal dated June 12, 1643:

An Ordinance of the Lords and Commons in Parliament, for the calling of an Assembly of learned and godly Divines, and others, to be consulted with by the Parliament, for the settling of the Government and Liturgy of the Church of England, and for vindicating and clearing of the Doctrine of the said Church from false aspersions and interpretations. Whereas, amongst the infinite blessings of Almighty God upon this nation, none is, or can be, more dear unto us than the purity of our religion; and for that, as yet many things remain, in the Liturgy, discipline, and government of the Church, which do necessarily require a further and more perfect reformation than yet hath been attained.¹

Parliament protected the divines during the civil war, and as a result the Westminster Assembly produced the documents that for over three centuries have guided reformed churches around the globe in their doctrines, worship, and governance. The church should not lose sight of the fact that the *Westminster Confession of Faith* itself is a wondrous provision of God's providence. For again, the fact that she does so bears witness itself to the truth contained in the seventh sentence-paragraph of the chapter on providence. "As the providence of God does, in general,

¹ William M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, Third Edition (Edmonton, AB Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993), 97.

reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it takes care of His Church, and disposes all things to the good thereof” (*WCF* 5.7). The Westminster divines stated that the providence of God is characterized by two types: his general providence over all creatures and his special providence to the church.

A Brief Review of the General Providence of God in Governing over All His Creatures

Certainly the doctrine of God's works of providence, “his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions” (*WSC* 11), has been taught by the church through the ages.

In reviewing the church fathers on their teaching of this subject, Joel Beeke and Mark Jones point out how many wrote treatises on this subject. These treatments of this doctrine would include seeing God working in grand things, such as civilizations. For example, Augustine wrote *The City of God* “in part to teach the providence of God over nations and civilizations, especially in light of the crisis caused by the fall of Rome to the barbarians.”² It also includes the smallest of things, for in devoting three chapters of his *Institutes* to this subject Calvin said regarding God, “He sustains, nourishes, and cares for everything he has made, even to the least sparrow.”³

The Reformers saw this doctrine as one expressing simultaneously God's omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. This truth is testified to in the first paragraph of this chapter in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which states, “God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy” (*WCF* 5:1). The more devotionally written Heidelberg Catechism expresses all three of these qualities when it asks and answers in an almost lyrical way:

Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. The almighty and ever present power of God by which God upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand (*HC* 27).

The link between God's attributes and providence highlights how this doctrine is rightly developed in the confession. The *Westminster Confession* begins with Scripture as the self-revealing testimony of God, then in the second chapter discusses God in his essence and attributes. The third chapter of the confession follows by developing God's eternal decree, which begins by stating that “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass” (*WCF* 3.1). The phrase “whatsoever comes to pass” is really another way of speaking of God's providence. This third chapter goes on to develop the doctrines of predestination and reprobation, with the former being concerned with the church. The following fourth chapter “Of Creation” describes the stage upon which God's decrees will now unfold. Then the chapter of this study, the fifth one “Of

² Joel R Beeke and Mark Jones. *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*. First Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 161.

³ John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles. 1559 translation edition. (Philadelphia; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.16.1.

Providence,” logically follows because it is the outworking of God’s eternal decrees in the realm of the earth and its inhabitants.

As J.I. Packer says of providence,

If Creation was a unique exercise of divine energy causing the world to be, providence is a continued exercise of that same energy...The Creator, according to his own will, (a) keeps all creatures in being, (b) involves himself in all events, and (c) directs all things to their appointed end. The model is of purposive personal management with total ‘hands-on’ control: God is completely in charge of his world. His hand may be hidden, but his rule is absolute.⁴

The former articles have developed this general or universal providence of God, and have certainly addressed the subject of this article which is the special providence of God for the church. A closer look at the “hidden hand” of which Packer speaks is warranted. For Scripture tells us that hidden hand is, in a manner of speaking, the right hand of God.

A Doctrinal Insight into the Special Providence of God in Caring for His Church

When the gospel was being proclaimed at Pentecost, following the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord with the giving of the Holy Spirit, Peter testified that Jesus Christ was at the right hand of the Father. “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:33; see also v.34). The consistent witness of Scripture is that Jesus now rules over heaven and earth at the Father’s right hand.⁵ Jesus Himself reflected on the outcome of his sacrificial death and resurrection, and made universal claims of power, saying that “All things have been handed over to me by my Father” and “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” (Mat 11:27; 28:18). Paul summarizes what this means for the church when he concludes the first chapter of the epistle to the Ephesians with these words: “He put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:22-23). The Lord Jesus Christ rules over all for the sake of his church.

Recognizing Jesus as Lord, the Second Adam sitting now as king and priest at the right hand of God the Father, knowing that he will rule until he brings all things in submission under his feet and presents them to the Father, is known as the doctrine of the mediatorial rule of Christ. Historically, this doctrine has been precious to the Reformed Presbyterian Church and was most carefully developed in the work *Messiah the Prince* by William Symington. Of these words in Ephesians, Symington says of the expression “[God] gave him to be head over all things to the church” that this is “language which asserts at once the unlimited extent of the mediatorial power, and the high and glorious end for which such power has been conferred.”⁶

Interestingly, Symington relates Christ’s mediatorial rule to providence. He states:

⁴ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2001), 54.

⁵ See Ps 110:1; Mt 22:44, 26:64; Mk 12:36, 14:62; Lk 20:42, 22:69; Acts 7:55-56; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3, 13, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2; I Pet 3:22.

⁶ William Symington, *Messiah the Prince or, The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ* (Edmonton, Alberta: Still Waters Revival Books, 1990), 187.

...it is proper to remark that all the dispensations of providence, as well as the various departments of creation, are under the dominion of the Mediator. This is proved, not only by the universal language employed by the inspired writers when speaking of Christ's rule in general, but by the express terms of Scripture with reference to this particular subject.⁷

Throughout his work, Symington develops this concept thoroughly from Scripture. For instance, in the opening scene of the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet sees one like a son of man seated on a throne above a sea of crystal supported by cherubim dashing forth, who are riding upon wheels within wheels with their rims covered with eyes. Symington sees this as testimony to Christ's constant, vivid governance over all things. "We have here, then, an explicit proof from Scripture that the affairs of providence are managed by the Mediator: managed, too, with perfect wisdom, as indicated by the rings of the wheels being 'full of eyes round about.'"⁸ The purpose of his all-encompassing rule, which "embraces every thing animate and inanimate, rational and irrational, moral and immoral, individual and social; -every thing, in short, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth," is clear.⁹ Symington says it so that Christ can bring about the full effects of his salvation for the church through the ages. At the heart of this view of providence is the very glory of Christ himself.

This is not a mere speculative matter; it affects the perfection of the Redeemer's character. So much so, that, without such extent of power as is supposed, he could not be our Redeemer at all. To the salvation of men, he must be invested with power, not only over such as are saved, but over such as are to be saved; he must possess a right to bring them under the influence of means, as well as to render the means efficacious;—a right to subordinate every thing in nature and providence to the accomplishment of this high and glorious undertaking. To limit or restrict the mediatorial rule is thus clearly subversive of the Saviour's glory.¹⁰

In other words, the disposal of providence by Christ is what ensures that those who have been predestined will be called, and those who are called will be justified, and those who are justified will be glorified (see Rom 8:30). He controls all things for the sake and protection of the church. He executes "the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies" (WSC 26).

The kingly rule of Christ using providence for his church is most vividly pictured in the book of Revelation. The Apostle John recounts in verses 12-16 of the first chapter this beatific vision of Christ:

I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

⁷ William Symington, *Messiah the Prince or, The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ* (Edmonton, Alberta: Still Waters Revival Books, 1990), 98.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

John says that he saw “one like a son of man.” The one before him is the Messiah of Daniel (Daniel 7:13-14). The unique privilege of the Messiah or Christ is that he would be both priest and king to his people (Psalm 110). He is wearing a multi-colored robe that reaches to his feet, and he has a golden sash across his chest. This was the clothing of the high priest.¹¹ When the high priest came out from ministering in the temple, with this robe of reds and blues and scarlets, a golden girdle with the jewels of the tribes of Israel mounted upon it, and then stepped into the light, many in antiquity say that he looked radiant in his array. Such radiance John now beholds in Christ.

Indeed, Christ is described by saying that his head is a pure white like the glistening snow on a bright wintry day, his face is shining like the brilliance of the sun, and his feet are like the burnished bronze over the hot fire of a furnace. John is beholding the glory of God unveiled, shining intensely from Jesus the high priest from head to foot. He is describing Jesus as a living flame.

Consider further now Christ’s awesome glory as king. John had told the church that she was a kingdom of priests (Rev 1:6), and now John relates how Christ had revealed to him the great royalty of his own priesthood. He has in his right hand seven stars - burning, shining suns being held in his right hand. The Christ standing before John is not five feet, ten inches tall. He towers above John in his magnificence, holding celestial bodies in his palm. Just as he declared to Job that he had bound the seven stars of the constellation Pleiades together like a chain (Job 38:31), the kingly, creative, providential, and also redemptive rule of Christ is seen in his holding these stars in his hand. Even today we use stars to signify political rule. John sees Jesus holding these very stars. He rules over creation and the nations of the earth.

Then, as Jesus speaks with his sharp two-edged sword coming from His mouth (verse 16), he is indicating that all must listen to his command. Jesus identifies himself, saying. "I am the First and the Last" (Rev 1:17). This title is a clear identification of Christ as the Jehovah of the Old Testament, the One who said through Isaiah, "I am the first and the last, and there is no God besides Me" (Isaiah 44:6). He is "the Living One" (verse 18), of whom it said in Jeremiah 10:10, "The Lord is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes and the nations cannot endure His indignation." Jesus is saying that the God who controls all, who is independent of all, who exists through all times, whom no one has made, the God of the Old Testament, that God is he! And because He conquered death and now lives forevermore, even death and hell is under his dominion (verse 18).

What an overwhelming, even frightening vision of providence this is! Certainly it was for John, who said he fell before his feet like a dead man. In verse 17, we see Jesus reviving John, using the same right hand that holds the stars to raise him up in power. He speaks those words John had heard so often, "Do not be afraid." What John is seeing in his vision is Jesus ruling in God's courtroom as the King-Priest, and the angels are there as ministers in his court. More directly, the Lord tells John the stars in his hand are “the seven angels of the seven churches” (Rev 1:20). In other words, the local congregations existing in the seven cities that God is addressing in this letter have elected representatives for them standing before Him in heaven. They are representing the churches' interest before the Great King. Later on this book, when God pronounces judgment on the enemies of the church, it is these seven angels who carry out the execution of the punishment. What God is telling the church through this symbolism is that her interests are known by Him and how his providence in “a most special manner...takes care of His Church.” (WCF 5.7).

¹¹ See Ex 28:4; 29:5; 39:1-29; Lev 16:4 to see the similarity of the clothing.

How fully Christ wants the church to understand her God-given importance in the outworking of providence can be seen in one final aspect of the imagery. Jesus is seen as standing among seven lampstands, which he also clearly states are symbols of the churches (verse 20). One should recall that in the temple there was one lampstand with seven branches whose light was never to dim, representing the light of the nation of Israel to the world. But now seven lampstands exist in the heavenly temple with Christ standing in their midst, the one whose glorious fire gives them light.¹² His message is simple. God has replaced the singular nation of Israel with the worldwide church. Her lampstand is never to dim. It is always to shine continually with the fiery light of Christ.

So what should be expected?

The Anticipated Experiences of the Disposing Providence of God in Loving His People

In his work *The Mystery of Providence*, the seventeenth century Puritan John Flavel seeks to create gratitude in the hearts of English saints by having them consider the providences of God. He brings the catechism answer that providence is God's "most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions" to life. Through its thirteen chapters, Flavel has them reflect on the special providence of God in the lives of believers, by such varied things as how they could have been born in other places than cultured, privileged England, to the ways God works to help His people grow in sanctification by preventing many evil temptations. Those living in the United States might find it amusing to hear him say:

Suppose your mothers had brought you forth in America, among the savage Indians, who herd together as brute beasts, are scorched with heat, and starved with cold, being naked, destitute and defenceless. How poor, miserable, and unprovided with earthly comfort and accommodations are many millions of the inhabitants of this world!¹³

Indeed, every time a person drives down a paved road, open a refrigerator, answer a cell phone, turn up or down the thermostat, or click another link on the internet, he should marvel, not so much at the ingenuity of man, but at God's kind providence in allowing these comforts.

Yet for the believer, as Flavel goes on to show and the psalmist exclaims, the heavenly providences of God toward the church are innumerable. In focusing on the theme of providence, Flavel brings out Scripture after Scripture to make his case in each chapter, then adds historical accounts and stories of remarkable providential works of God which are similar in nature to portions of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. Passages in the Bible read many times previously have new light shed on them by approaching them in this manner, as one sees the living hand of God at work in protecting, sanctifying, and preparing his people for eternity. This work is very devotional in nature, and is not one the reader would want to rush through. Instead, it is best read a section or chapter at a time, pausing to reflect on one's life to see the "invisible, right hand" of God at work.

¹² The lampstands' connection to Christ is seen again in the beginning of each address to the church. Note how in Revelation 2:1,8,12,18; 3:1,7,14 Jesus repeats a portion of the description of Himself from the first chapter to identify who he is to the churches (to Ephesus he is the one who holds the seven stars, to Smyrna he is called the First and the Last, etc.).

¹³ John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1963), 45.

Desiring now that this doctrine be treated pastorally in nature, a passage from Isaiah that Flavel references will be used to apply the special providence of God in three specific ways. Isaiah 43:1-4 says:

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life.'

Know that the Lord has ransomed you.

In verses 3-4, Lord makes an amazing statement. "I have given Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in your place...I will give other men in your place and other peoples in exchange for your life." We know that our ransom *price* was not the blood of other peoples, for no human blood can pay so great a price. Only the pure and precious blood of Jesus can do that. No, what is being implied is our ransom *choice* – he redeemed us while others have not been so favorably treated. As Calvin states regarding this verse, "The Lord takes such care of all believers that he values them more highly than the whole world."¹⁴

Friend, it is no accident that you are under the gospel when so much of the world is not. This summer at RPTS we had a missionary teach who labored to learn Arabic, gave over twenty years of his life to bring the gospel to a Muslim nation, and then had to leave with little fruit because the country was not open. We should marvel that we have been ransomed when they have not, and pray one day they would be.

Think of how the Lord has protected you.

The language of passing through waters reminds us of Noah on the ark or the people going through the Red Sea. Walking through flame and fire remind us of what happened to Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they passed unharmed through Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. With his disciples in a boat during a storm to Stephen seeing Christ standing at the right hand of God in heaven when he was being martyred, in all these cases the Lord was with his people to deliver them from a temporary danger or in an ultimate way. Think of the great protection we enjoy still in this land to worship freely, to have truth at our disposal, and to live in ways that honor Christ. Yet also consider that in less free lands, such as the most populous nation in the world, how the Lord is blessing his church despite the authorities' attempts to crush it.

Sense how the Lord is with you.

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." This declaration is a promise of God that has never been revoked, but has grown stronger and more convincing over time. When Jacob was to take Israel into the Promised Land, the Lord said, "Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you" (Josh 1:9). Here in the Book of Isaiah God promises that he will come as Immanuel, or "God with us" (Is 7:14). Before his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus he promised would not leave the church as orphans (Jn 14:18-20). Indeed, in the Great

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, ed. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1892), 322.

Commission, not only does Christ remind his church of his great authority, but also of his presence. "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mat 28:20). He sent his Holy Spirit to the church as the Comforter, who cares for us and reminds us daily of his commands and love.

How that can help us when we suffer. A pastor was ministering to a young man in another country whose father had abandoned him and his family. The boy's mother encouraged the son to write to the pastor, so in a letter the son wrote, *"I'm still hurt about what happened. Thinking of it always makes me cry, especially when someone asks me about what happened. Up to now, I am still longing for a father figure. Yes, God is my father in heaven but I am still young and I am only a human kid yearning for a father's attention, love and support."*

Our heart breaks at those words. Yet there was a need for this teenage boy to see more fully the love of God in the midst of all this. The pastor did not back away from this hard providence but, in the manner seen in the letters of men like Calvin and Rutherford, pressed the providence gently back to seek to reveal greater truths to the young man:

Your sentiments are well expressed, and it is right for you to want your father's love and support. That is what fathers are to give. However, when we are hurt or betrayed by others in this life, there is a greater love to which we can turn. I am concerned by your statement, *"God is my father in heaven but..."* One should not have "but" after saying God is his father if they truly understand the depths of God's love for them. That is why I sent you Psalm 27 to think about. Please hear it again: "For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me up."

Very tenderly I say to you this: Notice that the psalmist says almost the opposite of what you said. You say that you have a father in heaven but your earthly father has left you. The psalmist says that both his parents have forsaken him but he has a heavenly father. You must learn how wonderfully deep the love of God for you is. I wonder if that is especially what God is wanting you to learn at this difficult time? He wants you to find all of your comfort, identity and strength in Him, and to do that you must know of His love. His love is far greater than any earthly love, for it is eternal and adoptive (Eph 1:4-5), prior to our love (I John 4:10), immeasurable (Eph 3:14-19), and clearly demonstrated (John 15:13; Rom 5:8).

For what can separate us from that love? Certainly no "providence" can! That is the apostle Paul's answer at the end of Romans 8.

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We must recognize even in hard providences the invisible, right hand of God. We may pass through the waters, but we must see them for what they are. The psalmist, like Isaiah using the imagery of water to describe his troubles, says to God in Psalm 42:7, "Deep calls to deep at the sound of *your* waterfalls; all *your* breakers and *your* waves have rolled over me." He uses providence to sanctify and ultimately glorify his people.

Conclusion: The Sum Total of Providence

Christ will use providence to build his church. He rules over all things in order that the nations be disciplined. He is filling the temple of his church with his presence and glory through the unfolding of history. We must realize that the sum total will be that even providence itself will be brought to a glorious end.

Now, at the end of the world, the kingdom of the Messiah shall have been brought to perfection ; the work given him to do shall have been finished. Those given him by the Father shall have been found out, redeemed, sanctified, saved, and gathered all together into one; their enemies, even death itself, shall have been subdued; and the whole scheme of providence shall have been developed and wound up.¹⁵

¹⁵ Symington, *Messiah*, 327.