

REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL



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Description

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From Rutherford Hall

Dr. Jerry O'Neill

President of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

I hope you will enjoy this edition of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal. We had a great conference earlier in the fall where we heard professors teaching on Chapter 5 of our Westminster Confession of Faith entitled, “Of Providence”. In this edition of the Journal, you will see the fruit of the labors of our faculty members.

Sometimes, even in Reformed circles, we get sloppy with our speech. For example, when two people find one another after being separated in the middle of Times Square on New Year’s Eve, we hear remarks from brothers and sisters in Christ who say, “That was providential,” or “That was very providential.” At one level the first of these quotes is correct. It certainly was God’s providence that that the two people were able to find one another in such circumstances.

But the problem is that statements like those above seem to imply that God’s providence only includes the things that turn out well from our perspective. What if the two individuals had not found each other? Would that, also, have been “providential”? Would it have been “very providential”? The Westminster Confession of Faith begins Chapter 5 with these words, “God the 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.” This summary of Biblical teaching on the subject of providence is clear. If the two people mentioned above had not found each other, that would have been God’s providence as well.

The thoughtful believer will not call one thing “very providential”, and other act “providential”—or perhaps not providential at all! But he will make a distinction between a “kind providence” and a “stern providence”. Even then, though, we must realize that for the believer, God works all things out for good. In that sense, even the worst things that happen to a believer are “kind providences” as our sovereign Lord works out all things for our good and His glory.

The seventeenth-century Puritan Thomas Watson in his book *All Things for Good* (originally entitled *A Divine Cordial*), referring to what I have called “kind providences” and “stern providences”, calls these “the best things” and the “worst things”. Per Romans 8:28, for those who love God and are called according to His purpose, both the best and the worst work for our good. But even for those that do not love God, who are not called according to His purpose, God is still directing and governing all things according to his most wise and holy providence.

From Rutherford Hall,

Jerry O'Neill

Does God have Free Will?: The Meaning of Providence

Dr. George Scipione

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Introduction

Ask most people this question: “What is providence?” and you will get a variety of answers. Some will say “A city in the state of Rhode Island”; or, “A Roman Catholic college, the Friars, that play basketball in the Big East Conference.” Really Reformed types might say a Reformed College in Southern California that has Hillary Gamble on the faculty!

But Presbyterians, and other biblically literate people, should respond to the question, “What is providence?” thusly: “God’s works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions” (WSC #11). Or, better yet: “God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory” (WLC # 18). And, for those who are familiar with the Three Forms of Unity: “The almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by His hand, He upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand” (HC # 27). Heidelberg Catechism #28 makes this personal, “What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by His providence doth still uphold all things?” Answer: “That we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we may place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from His love; since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.”

We live in a post-Christian, postmodern culture. Most people, including many professing Christians, do not believe in the triune God of the Bible who created, sustains and directs the world. Pagan thought prevails with the ancient dualism of impersonal Fate and Chance in a cosmic dog-fight with man trying to manage the mess without being ground to dust. The concept of a personal triune God does not make sense to this culture, let alone a God that has a free-will. We are far beyond even the mechanical deistic view of a clock-maker god. These so-called Christians hold to “open theism” with its puny god who is limited by man’s will, by time, and by space. Most who proclaim to believe in the God of the Bible really have a “Mr. Potato Head” view of God. They take the attributes that they like, stick them into their concept of God and viola: they have conjured up a truncated god that they can like and are sure they can manage. Thus, most of these people live bouncing between irrational, inane optimism and deep, dark despair.

The aforementioned catechism answers are based on the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 5. Let’s consider this chapter entitled, Of Providence. Section I says:

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.

We must go to the Bible for the answers to these important questions about Providence and God's free will. Remember Romans 3:1-4: Let God be true and every man a liar. For our subject, let God have free will and every man not! If God does not have free will, then no one has it, including you and me! Free will is usually understood as, "1. Unconstrained choice to do or act. 2. the power of directing our own actions without constraint by necessity or fate."

This is different than the Bible's view of free will. Free will is the ability of a rational being to choose. A rational creature is free to choose only so far as his nature and abilities allow him to choose. This is true for God and man, although, of course, in different ways, as He is the triune Creator and we the finite, sinful creatures. Today we live in a world where people think they are free to be whatever they imagine themselves to be. The issues involved in gender identity come to mind; however, that is another topic for another time. Of course, providence and free will make no sense without the Biblical world and life view set forth in the Bible and the Reformed Creeds in general and in the Westminster Confession of Faith in particular: see Chapter II, Of God, and of the Holy Trinity, Chapter III, Of God's Eternal Decree, Chapter IV, Of Creation.

When you consider any subject, including providence, you must start with God. Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created..." This is where it all starts. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever, Amen", Romans 11:36. A theocentric view of life must be taken versus an anthropocentric or creaturely view. Ever since the Fall into sin, men have said, "Did God really say?!" Yes, God who is true has said. And it is Satan who is a liar and murderer. And it is we who have tinkered with the truth. This loss of God centered thinking has tragic effects on life. This is well chronicled in Psalm 19 and Romans 1-3. No amount of common grace knowledge of general revelation can overcome the Fall. Only electing, saving grace through the work of the Holy Spirit applying the special revelation of the Word can. So for us, as fallen, and I trust, redeemed sinners, the question is: How does God define his providence and free will?

When you take an honest look at the text of Scripture, it is clear that God is personally and intimately involved with his creation. The triune God of the Bible, Yahweh, creates out of nothing all things that are (Hebrews 11:3). Consider Genesis 1-10. These early chapters are real, time-and-space history, not myths or merely sacred poetry. Again, that is another article for another time. God is intimately involved with his creation. In his creative acts he speaks: the Word goes out and accomplishes His will as the Spirit carries him and then hovers over the creation.

The Psalms

Psalm 29 makes clear that Jesus, the Word, providentially and powerfully directs the creation.

PSALM 29 a Psalm of David

Ascribe to YAHWEH, O heavenly beings,

Ascribe to YAHWEH glory and strength.

Ascribe to YAHWEH the glory due his name;
Worship YAHWEH in the splendor of holiness.

The voice of YAHWEH is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
YAHWEH, over many waters.

The voice of YAHWEH is powerful;
The voice of YAHWEH is full of majesty.

The voice of YAHWEH breaks cedars;
YAHWEH breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf;
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

The voice of YAHWEH flashes forth flames of fire;
The voice of YAHWEH shakes the wilderness;
YAHWEH shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
The voice of YAHWEH makes the deer give birth
and strips the forests bare,
and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

YAHWEH sits enthroned over the flood;
YAHWEH sits enthroned as king forever.
May YAHWEH give strength to his people!
May YAHWEH bless his people with peace!

This psalm makes clear that God is personally and intimately involved with every day, normal occurrences. Yahweh's voice or word is powerful. Clearly, this is NOT a mechanical view of the world. Rather, it is a personal, covenantal view assured by the Noahic administration of the covenant of grace (Genesis 8:20-9:7). This is providence, not the laws of nature. This is the Father's care, not mother earth's gift!

Psalm 104 is also abundantly clear and is even more pointed in its proclamation of providence.

PSALM 104

Bless YAHWEH, O my soul!

O YAHWEH my God, you are very great!

You are clothed with splendor and majesty,

Covering yourself with light as with a garment,

stretching out the heavens like a tent.

he makes the clouds his chariot;

he rides on the wings of the wind;

he makes his messengers winds,

his ministers a flaming fire.

He sets the earth on its foundations,

so that it should never be moved.

You covered it with the deep as with a garment;

The waters stood above the mountains.

At your rebuke they fled;

at the sound of your thunder they took flight.

The mountains rose, the valleys sank down

to the place that you appointed for them.

You set a boundary that they may not pass,

so that they might not again cover the earth.

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;

they flow between the hills;

they give drink to every beast of the field;

the wild donkeys quench their thirst.

Besides them the birds of the heavens dwell;
They sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

You cause the grass to grow for the livestock
and plants for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth
and wine to gladden the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine
and bread to strengthen man's heart.
The trees of YAHWEH are watered abundantly,
The cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has her home in the fir trees.
The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the rock badgers.

He made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows it's time for setting.
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the beasts of the forest creep about.
The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they steal away
and lie down in their dens.
Man goes out to work
and to his labor until evening.

O lord, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom have you made them all;

the earth is full of your creatures.

Here is the sea, great and wide,

which teems with creatures innumerable,

living things both small and great.

There go the ships,

and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.

These all look to you,

To give them their food in due season.

When you give it to them, they gather it up;

when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

When you hide your face, they are dismayed;

when you take away their breath, they die

and return to dust.

When you send forth your Spirit, they are created.

And you renew the face of the ground.

May the glory of YAHWEH endure forever;

may YAHWEH rejoice in his works,

who looks on the earth and it trembles,

who touches the mountains and they smoke!

I will sing to YAHWEH as long as I live;

I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

May my meditation be pleasing to him,

for I rejoice in YAHWEH.

Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and the wicked be no more!
Bless YAHWEH, O my soul!
Praise YAHWEH!

Verse 30 is especially significant: “When You send forth Your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.” Thus, you must realize that God is personally involved in everything although He is NOT part of the created world. Jehovah made and continues to care for the earth NOT mother nature or Ghia!

Both Testaments witness to this reality. This providential control is comprehensive. Listen to the Holy Spirit who speaks to this issue.

Proverbs 16:1: “The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.” Thus, even this intimate action of rational man is under God’s control! Examples are prophecy by believers and non-believers. He is sovereign over the words of men.

Proverbs 16:4: “The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.” Although He is not the author of sin (James 1), He has His sovereign plan in His hand and uses the wicked for His good purposes! Some examples are: Saul in the Old Testament and Judas Iscariot in the New Testament.

Proverbs 16:9 “The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.” Clearly, man is a rational being who plans his life. However, only God can bring about the desired outcome. He is sovereign over the actions of men. For example: Sampson in the Old Testament, Peter in the New Testament.

Proverbs 16:33: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” There is no such thing as chance or luck! Even this “random” act is planned/controlled! Therefore, no more “pot luck dinners”; rather “pot providence dinners”! God is sovereign over events. Examples include: Haman in the Old Testament and choosing the apostle to replace Judas in the New Testament.

Proverbs 19:21 “Many are the plans in the mind (heart) of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.” The sovereignty of God is comprehensive and all powerful. Man is limited and exercises his will but does NOT control God nor trump him. Pharaoh and Ahab are examples.

Proverbs 20:24 “A man’s steps are from the LORD, how then can man understand his way?” God’s sovereign will/plan is so comprehensive that to have a true and full understanding of your heart and life is an impossibility! Only God knows everything including you and your ways!!! Jesus and his dealings with Peter stand out.

Proverbs 21:1 “The King’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD, he turns it wherever he will.” Politics and politicians, including their decisions, are included in God’s plan and care! The picture is of an irrigation ditch. God is sovereign over desires. Here, some examples are: Cyrus and Herod.

Proverbs 21:30: “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.” We hear echoes of Psalm 2. The Lord laughs at the machinations of man. Balaam and Barak’s evil is a perfect example. Man is judged by God (Psalms 1 & 2).

Proverbs 21:31: “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD.” This is tied to verse 30. Human planning and effort are real and important BUT not ultimate in determining the outcome. God is ultimate. There are several examples but Hezekiah and Sennacherib stand out.

Proverbs 29:26: “Many seek the face of a ruler, but it is from the LORD that a man gets justice.” Again, human planning and effort are real and important BUT not ultimate in determining the outcome. God is ultimate. Paul’s trials cover this! As we come to a presidential election, let us note this well!

Psalm 33:10-11: “The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the people. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.” This is a great summary of the Old Testament’s view. The prophets and the historical books all say “amen” to this view.

The New Testament

The New Testament builds on this view of providence, gives more details and ties it to the work of Christ.

Ephesians 1:11-12: “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.” There is much here for our contemplation. Christ is the fountain of all our blessings. God plans and executes all things in an ordained, orderly manner. This sovereign salvation depends on God bringing it about according to his plans and prophecies in the Old Testament. Thus, we must not worry (Matthew 6:19-34), nor fear (Matthew 10:26-33). His providential care extends to fallen sparrows and the number of hairs on our heads!

Thus, you must not believe in Fate and Fortune. Do not act as if they exist. The rest of Chapter 5 of the Westminster Confession of Faith extends and completes our consideration.

II. “Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.” In other words, God structures things so that certain creatures work in different ways. All do not work in the same manner. Note well, the three categories: necessity, freely or rationally, and contingently from his providential hand.

III. “God in his ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.” In other words, God is orderly and works in predictable ways; therefore man can do scientific investigation. BUT, God has and may do what are called wonders, signs or miracles.

IV. “The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God; who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the

author or approver of sin.” In other words, God is pure, holy and does not sin in this control of the world. The well-known Rabbi is wrong: we do NOT have to choose between a good god and an all-powerful god. God is both. The open theists are wrong. Even the Fall and even the Cross are in his plan and come from His providential hand!

V. “The most wise, righteous and gracious God, doth oftentimes leave for a season his own children to manifold temptations, and to the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption, and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.” In other words, whatever difficulties that arise for the believer, whether internal or external, God is on the throne, in control and up to something good, even when he is providentially pounding the child of God.

VI. “As for those wicked and ungodly men, whom God as a righteous judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them he not only withholdeth his grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin; and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan: whereby it comes to pass, that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.” In other words, God’s providence even extends to the spiritual state of unbelievers and the process of their hardening, whether by blessings or curses.

VII. “As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof.” In other words, the LORD has the back of the church! As we noted before, we do not need to worry or fear! (Psalm 2 and Ephesians 1:15-23).

Conclusion

Dear friend, you must realize that God is good and wise. He is good all of the time. He is wise all of the time. Above all, He is holy, holy, holy! He is in control. If you are God’s child and united to Christ, you are worth more than many sparrows, yes all of them together; he will give you bread, fish and eggs NOT stones, snakes and scorpions! Also, He will grant you to suffer with Christ so you will grow in grace. Yes, you will suffer with Christ.

Does God have a free will? Indeed, God has a free will which is bound by his total character. He is free but bound to his holy perfections. His will is free but bound to his pure, holy character. He is not the Mr. Potato Head god of man’s making but the triune one that Isaiah saw, Isaiah 6. He is not the “force” of Star wars. He is not the idolatrous imagination of man drunk on his own sinful, fallible and limited wisdom. He is the living, holy One.

What then does this mean? You and I should bow down and worship him! You and I should praise him. He is wise; you and I ignorant. He is strong; you and I weak. He is just and impartial; you and I self-protecting and prejudiced. He is good; you and I perverse. Above all, he is merciful and loving through Christ; you and I are self-centered and hard-hearted. By grace you have been saved through faith in THIS GOD, Yahweh, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:1-10).

Dear friend, providence should lead to praise and worship! Learn this from God’s Word. Learn from the Bible’s teaching. Learn from the lives of Job, Jonah, Nebuchadnezzar, and Paul. Learn it from Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Nevertheless, your will be done not mine!”

Learn to trust him and his providential, Fatherly care. After all, the blood of the Lamb and his righteousness makes you worth more than many sparrows. Yes, God has free will only limited by his sinless holiness. He has exercised that will towards you in Christ. You are a renewed image bearer reflecting Jesus. You are safe from the world, your flesh and the Devil. Praise him that he is in charge and not anyone or anything else.

If you are not his, flee to him now. He will never turn the humble away! We will be able to help you be found by him.

Now dear child of the King, relax, enjoy him, put on the whole armor of God. Enjoy him as he providentially gets you to glory. Memorize Scriptures on this truth. Meditate on God's providence. Memorize and meditate on the Catechisms.

WSC Q.11 What are God's works of providence?

A. God's works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.

WLC Q. 18 What are God's works of providence?

A. God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them and all their actions, to his own glory.

HC Question 27 What dost thou mean by the providence of God?

The Almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by his hand, he upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.

HC Question 28 What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by his providence?

We can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from His love; for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.

Beloved, in him you live and move and have your being (Acts 17:28).

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?
Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36).

How Can God Govern Over All Things?: The Means of Providence

Prof. Thomas G. Reid, Jr.

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Introduction

In Gordon Clark's (1902-1985) discussion of the providence of God as described in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chapter 5, Clark recounts an interesting story.

My uncle once hired a chauffeur to drive him around a mountainous part of Turkey. As the chauffeur kept up too fast a speed around the sharp curves along the precipices, my uncle urged more caution. But the Turk replied that the date of their deaths was fated; and if this was the day, caution would be of no use; whereas[,] if this was not the day, caution was unnecessary.¹

Clark then wryly observes, "The Turk was clever, but not Calvinistic."² Why? Because God's providence is always worked out according to means, which helps to undergird the responsibility mankind faces for its choices in life.

The teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith on the subject of the means of providence is found in Chapter 5, Paragraph 3, which reads, "God[,] in His ordinary providence[,] maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them[,] at His pleasure."

In considering these means of providence, three questions need to be raised and answered.

What is the correct definition of the means of providence?

God is pleased to use two basic means in order to further his work of providence. One is the primary or direct means, in which God Himself works in an extraordinary way to accomplish His purposes in providence. The other is the secondary or indirect means, in which God works through other beings or things to accomplish His purposes in providence. A. A. Hodge (1823-1886) explains why the word "causes" may also be used of this phenomenon, since the word "means" may be defined: "through the agency of second causes subject to his [God's]

¹ Gordon Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, c1965), 62.

² *Ibid.*

control”.³ But Calvin is right that “there is no strict or systematic distinction” between the two means or causes.⁴

A classic example of the difference between the two means of providence is found in Acts 12:20-24. A crowd from Tyre and Sidon proclaimed King Herod to be a god and not a man (verse 22). “Because he did not give glory to God”, but accepted this false praise, Herod was “immediately” struck and killed by an angel of the Lord. That is an exercise of the primary or direct means of God’s providence. But, we also read that Herod “was eaten by worms and died” (verse 23),⁵ for God accomplished His providence through a secondary or indirect means at the same time. As R. C. Sproul (1939-) has observed, “The Westminster divines insisted that secondary causes are real, that the force we exert is real force. However, any force or any power exerted in this world depends upon the power of God for its efficacy.”⁶ The Puritan Obadiah Sedgewick (1600?-1658) helpfully compares the situation to a mill for grinding corn, which depends on the wind for its effect.⁷

And sometimes, as the Bremen Consensus of a German Reformed state church in 1595 explains,

The Scripture ascribes to God Himself what comes to pass by intermediate causes, as when Joseph says [Gen. 45:8], “It was not you who sent me, but God.” And: “I will send Assyria and charge him to act against the people of my wrath, to rob and to utterly destroy, though he does not so intend and neither does his heart so think” (Isa. 10[: 6-7]).⁸

The Westminster Confession states that God “is free to work without, above, and against” the means of providence, “at His pleasure”. Gordon Clark has questioned this formulation in his work *What Do Presbyterians Believe?*, focusing his ire on the word “without”. Clark asks, “Does God ever accomplish [H]is purpose without using some means or other?”⁹ However, Chad Van Dixhoorn (1971-) has no problem with the word “without”, believing that it means that God “is ‘free to work’ outside of normal parameters”.¹⁰ The Confession’s language here is found in the

³ A. A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2002), 95.

⁴ Sung-Sup Kim, *Deus providebit: Calvin, Schleiermacher, and Barth of the Providence of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, c2014), 30.

⁵ All quotations are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

⁶ R. C. Sproul, *The Invisible Hand: Do All Things Really Work for Good?* (Dallas: Word, c1996), 105.

⁷ Obadiah Sedgewick, *Providence Handled Practically*, ed. Joel Beeke and Matthew Winzer (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, c2007), 42.

⁸ James T. Dennison Jr., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, c2008), 3:670-671.

⁹ Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?*, 65-66.

¹⁰ Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), 72. He sees this phenomenon in Pauls’ shipwreck (Acts 27:9-28:6), and Job 34:20 and Matthew 4:4, proof texts in the Confession, although Clark dismisses Job 34:20 as irrelevant.

later Savoy Declaration of 1658¹¹ and the London Baptist Confession of 1677,¹² suggesting that it enjoyed wide acceptance among Calvinists of that period. Nonetheless, A. A. Hodge has a more clear formulation than the Confession does concerning this point: God created all second causes, “and [H]e must be able to do directly without them what [H]e does with them, and limit, modify, or supersede them, at [H]is pleasure.”¹³

Van Dixhoorn defines the second word of the Confession’s trio, “above”, as meaning that God “can stretch standard limitations and subvert conventional assumptions”.¹⁴

Gordon Clark is happier with the third word the Confession uses, “against”, but only if it “means nothing other than God’s power to work miracles and this to accomplish [H]is own aim in opposition to the usual processes of nature”.¹⁵ These three words are designed to express that, in Obadiah Sedgwick’s words, “Divine providence will seldom work and appear in set means.”¹⁶

The concern of the statement in the WCF 5,3, is on the “ordinary Providence” of God, on the secondary or indirect means, not on the primary or direct means. The focus is not on the unusual or miraculous or rare, but on the day-by-day providence of God within the universe He has created. In this regard, three aspects of providence must be discussed, although it is important to note that the Confession does not define the means which can be grouped under these three headings. Other Reformed and Presbyterian confessions of the time are equally silent on the definition of the means of providence;¹⁷ many do not even mention the means of providence.

The first aspect of the means of providence is God’s preservation of the universe, including the earth.

God created the universe “very good” (Gen. 1:31). But, with the fall into sin, the whole universe was affected, causing it to groan and labor, as in the birth pangs of a woman about to bring a child into the world (Rom. 8:22). As the winds and low air pressure of a tornado or hurricane cause the walls of a building to groan, threatening collapse, the universe after the Fall was under enormous pressures and risked disintegration. But God stepped in and maintained the universe, so that His purposes in grace toward the elect, almost all yet to be born into the world, might still be accomplished. If God were to remove His sustaining providence from the universe, everything would collapse, and God would be left alone once again.¹⁸ Frederick Leahy (1922-2006) observes:

¹¹ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 4:464.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4:539.

¹³ Hodge, *The Westminster Confession*, 98.

¹⁴ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 72.

¹⁵ Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?*, 65-66.

¹⁶ Sedgwick, *Providence Practically Handled*, 44.

¹⁷ Such as the Savoy Declaration (1658) or the London Baptist Confession (1677).

¹⁸ Sung-Sup Kim disagrees. “The threat is not merely that of dissolution and nonexistence. It is the menace of active evil, chaos, and confusion.” *Deus providebit*, 28.

Nothing in nature is static. There is constant change, and yet there is underlying regularity and stability[,] as promised and guaranteed by the covenant God[,] confirmed to Noah after the Flood (Gen. 9). Where does this uniformity in nature come from, if not from God who, through His Son, ‘upholds the universe by the word of his power’ (Heb. 1:3)?¹⁹

The Catechism of John Calvin (1509-1564) written in 1538 maintains that, “When [H]e is named ‘Creator of heaven and earth’, we are at the same time to understand that all [H]e once created [H]e everlastingly nourishes, sustains, and quickens.”²⁰ In Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he writes, “We see the presence of the divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception.”²¹

If we are to describe God’s preservation of the universe in more detail, we must posit the laws of nature, such as gravity, which maintain the universe as truly that, a universe – not a multiverse, but a universe or a world in which conflicting forces may rage against one another, but do not pull it apart and cause it to collapse.

The second aspect of the means of providence is God’s government of the universe.

Having maintained the very existence of the universe, God actively involves Himself in the progress of life. In this way, Christianity stands against Deism, which teaches that God creates and maintains, but no more. And this government is not limited; John Reisinger observes, “God controls and uses everyone, even the devil, in working out His plan (Isa. 10:7-11; Ps. 76:10).”²²

From the beginning, God established three creation ordinances to guide providence. One is the **Sabbath**, by which mankind is to follow God in resting one day in seven (Gen. 2:2-3; Ex. 20:8-11). Attempts to change the time, as in the early days of Soviet Russia, when a ten day week was implemented, in order to increase the collapsing productivity of the Russian population, since the link between work and reward had been severed by the Communists, were quickly abandoned. While it may be argued that the Sabbath in the modern West has been expanded to the weekend, doubling the time of rest, the modern world does not observe a regular Sabbath. As a result, we have had to create various holidays, scheduled strategically throughout the year, in order to try to imitate some of the benefits of the Sabbath.²³

¹⁹ Frederick S. Leahy, *The Hand of God: The Comfort of Having a Sovereign God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, c2006), 26.

²⁰ Found in Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 1:425.

²¹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:197.

²² John G. Reisinger, *The Sovereignty of God in Providence* (Pensacola, Florida: Chapel Library, [ca. 2005]), 1-2.

²³ Not to mention longer and longer vacations, and more and longer periods spent in “cures”. “A distinguished physician, Sir James Crichton Browne, has explained this necessity very forcibly. He says, ‘We doctors are now constantly compelled in the treatment of nervous diseases to prescribe for our patients prolonged periods of absolute rest and complete seclusion. Such periods are, I think, only Sundays in arrears.’” D. MacCallum Blair, *The Medical Aspect of Sabbath Observance* (London: Sovereign Grace Union, 1934), 7. Note that his comment was written already more than eighty years ago.

The second creation ordinance is **work**, in some ways the flip side of the Sabbath. Six days each week, men and women are to work to sustain their lives, develop the creation, and serve the Creator (Ex. 20:9). The shorter and shorter work week, like the thirty-five hour week legally imposed by the Socialists in France or the thirty hours per week recently proposed by Amazon for its employees,²⁴ indicate that modern man believes that work is a necessary evil, rather than a positive good.

The third creation ordinance is the **marriage** of one man and one woman (Gen. 2:18-25). From their one flesh relationship comes the next generation, which permits the perpetuation of the covenant line throughout the millennia, until the return of Christ. The modern assault on the meaning of marriage is a clear expression of mankind's battle against God's providence, believing that, if someone can do something approximating marriage, that he or she or they may do that something, no matter what God has built into the very fabric of His world.

But the creation ordinances do not exhaust the means by which God governs His creation through His providence.

A fourth aspect is **conscience**. While men are described in Rom. 1:18 as those "who suppress the truth in unrighteousness", we are unable to totally deny the existence, power, deity, and attributes of God (Rom. 1:19-20). A still, small voice remains in each human being, causing us to be uncomfortable at times in our rebellion against God. As Edmund Clowney (1917-2005) observed at the 1973 Urbana Missionary Convention of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, the very vehemence with which unbelieving men and women shake their fists at God indicates clearly that they know He is there and that they are responsible to love and obey Him. Of course, the transformed conscience of the believer can function to keep us faithful to God.

A fifth means by which God governs His universe is **law**. He has communicated His legal expectations of the crown of His creation first directly to mankind, then indirectly through spokesmen to us, and eventually in written form, as His Spirit caused God's prophets and apostles to write down His law. In that law, we see both the perfections of God and the imperfections of man. But God has not only written His law on stone and paper, He has written His law in our hearts. It is that law which educates our consciences and, in the elect, helps them to respond in covenantal faith and repentance. Jer. 31:33 observes:

I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD.²⁵

A sixth means by which God governs His universe is the **civil magistrate**. In the perfect life of the Garden of Eden, there was no need for the external order provided by someone granted the "power of the sword" (Rom. 13:4). But post-Fall, mankind needs the structure of human government to maintain order, life, morality, and property. The Book of Judges bears a salutary witness to what happens in the absence of stable human government: "Everyone did *what was right in his own eyes*" (17:6; 21:25, the final verse in the Book), leading to chaos and immorality.

²⁴ Strategically consistent with the requirements of the misnamed Affordable Care Act.

²⁵ Partially quoted in Heb. 10:15-17.

And King Solomon observes in Proverbs 21:1, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, Like the rivers of water; [H]e turns it wherever He wishes.” Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965) comments in his sermon on Is. 10:15 entitled “The Vaunting Ax” concerning the looming threat of the nation of Assyria against the nation of Israel. That pagan nation “is not a mere ax[,] but a rational and moral agent[;] he has his own purposes and counsels[,] even while he accomplishes the purpose of the Most High; and these purposes are wicked ... in doing so[,] he becomes guilty and is punished and destroyed.”²⁶

A seventh means by which God governs His universe is **human society** itself. We are not alone here, even if part of a married couple. For a prisoner, solitary confinement is considered a terrible punishment. Society influences us all, through its customs and its language, through the fear of the ostracism of others and the desire for the approval of others.

In these seven ways, and in others, God governs this world, working out His providence through means.

The third and final aspect of the means of providence is God’s sanctification of His people.

Since this aspect is not directly concerned with the universe in its entirety, it is not always considered a means of providence. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) defines providence in question and answer 11 as follows: “God’s works of providence are, [H]is most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all [H]is creatures, and all their actions.” The Westminster Larger Catechism question 18 is similar. So it appears at first glance that the Westminster divines did not conceive of providence as extending beyond preserving and governing. But note the immediately following question and answer.

Question: What special act of *providence* did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created?

Answer: When God created man, he entered into a *covenant* of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience[,] forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death. (Italics added.)

The Westminster divines thus defined providence in their Shorter Catechism as extending beyond preservation and government to include the covenantal relationship between God and His people, leading to their salvation and sanctification. The Westminster Confession concludes its consideration of the providence of God with a similar insight. “As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of [H]is church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof” (WCF V, 7). And we can readily see that God *does* work through the means of grace among His people in such a way that His providential control is extended and enhanced. The very first question of the wonderful Heidelberg Catechism (1563) also connects providence to our salvation.²⁷

Question: What is thy only comfort in life and death?

²⁶ Herman Hoeksema, *The Vaunting Ax* (Crete, Illinois: Evangelism Committee of the Protestant Reformed Church, ca. 2010), 4.

²⁷ As Herman Hoeksema observes in *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grandville, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, c2004), 322.

Answer: That I[,] with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with His precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so *preserves* me that[,] without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him.²⁸

Obadiah Sedgwick writes clearly, “God has *a special providence* over His church and people.”²⁹ G. C. Berkouwer (1903-1996) observes, “A distinction is often made in dogmatics, and in practical life, between general Providence, and special Providence, and even very special Providence.”³⁰ The last refers only to the elect. The more conservative Dutch Reformed theologian G. H. Kersten (1882-1948) agrees: “[W]e may not confuse the work of redemption with that of providence ... Nevertheless, the providence of God and the redemption of Christ are not to be separated from each other.”³¹

The primary means of God’s providential sanctification of His people is through preaching, the authoritative proclamation of His message through the men whom He has called and His church has formally recognized. Rom. 10:14-15 read:

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!”³²

Such preaching is conducted in the consciousness that it divides mankind into two distinct groups. The apostle Paul writes these sobering words, “For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one *we are* the aroma of death to death, and to the other[,] the aroma of life to life.” Paul then exclaims, “Who is sufficient for these things?” Nevertheless, Paul goes on preaching, “not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but[,] as of sincerity ... as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ” (II Cor. 2:15-17).

²⁸ *The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, Michigan: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, c2005), 83-84. Italics added.

²⁹ Sedgwick, *Providence Handled Practically*, [21] (italics added). Calvin sees a third form of providence in His work in the elect by the Holy Spirit. Kim, *Deus providebit*, 30-31. Calvin wrote, “The Church is God’s own workmanship, in which He exercises His providence.” *Ibid.*, 32. Another Puritan, John Flavel, summarizes the situation somewhat differently: “There are two means or instruments employed in this work. The Spirit, who effects it internally (Rom. 8:13), and Providence, which asserts it externally.” *The Mystery of Providence* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2002), 99.

³⁰ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, c1952), 180.

³¹ G. H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine Explained for the Congregations* (United States: Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Committee, c1980), 182.

³² The quotation is from Isaiah 52:7.

The secondary means of God's providential sanctification of His people is through the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the one initiatory, the other hortatory. Both are quite limited in their effects compared to the communicative and directive possibilities contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments when they are preached in fullness and boldness and faithfulness.

Thus, as Christian philosopher Paul Helm (1940-) maintains, the providence of God is complete, its means being concerned with three matters, "the cosmic, ecclesiastic[,] and personal".³³

Yet even as we list these many ordinary means by which God exercises His providential control over all things, a question nags at us: How do we explain God's use of means in providence? Are these three aspects and numerous actions not merely a disparate group of factors without an overarching meaning, leaving us rather mystified by the whole matter? There seems to be an orderliness in the means of providence, but why? And so we come to the second of the three questions to be considered tonight.

What is the correct explanation of the means of providence?

One theory advanced to explain the means of providence is **the natural law theory**, particularly connected with Thomas Aquinas (1225?-1274), the important medieval Romanist theologian. Therefore, this theory is advocated more typically by Roman Catholics than by Protestants. In the Thomistic tradition, the means of God's providence are all viewed as the expression of a law created by God and embedded in the natural order of the universe, coming to expression in varied but orderly ways.

Proponents of the natural law theory envision great apologetical potential in it, imagining that it provides a point of contact with unbelievers of many kinds. Look around you in nature, they say, and you can see that all is working together towards a goal, and only a divinely-determined goal can suffice to explain it all.

But, the natural law paradigm seems inadequate to explain the complexities of the means of providence. And, to the extent that it is true, it tends to crowd out the influence and thus responsibility of both man and God, making us little more than bystanders to a process we little control or understand. As A. A. Hodge writes, God's "will is expressed in what is called natural law, but it does not follow that [H]is whole power is exhausted in those processes, nor his whole will expressed in those laws."³⁴ Calvin observes, "But if God's government is so extended to all his works, it is a childish cavil to enclose it within the stream of nature."³⁵

Thus, the natural law theory fails to explain all of the means of God's providence, only some of them.

³³ Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, c1994), [93]

³⁴ Hodge, *The Westminster Confession*, 98.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:200.

A second theory advocated to explain the means of providence is **the common grace theory**, particularly associated with the Dutch Reformed theologian, educator, and politician Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and his disciples.³⁶ Kuyper explained the providential control of God over all things as having two tracks, a special grace track for the elect and a common grace track for all mankind, both the elect and the reprobate. In God's providential outworking of His purposes in creating and maintaining the universe, He manifests a mercy, a lovingkindness, a love, toward both the elect and the reprobate. Positing these twin graces, Kuyper believed, helped to explain the providence of God and especially the means He uses in it. G. I. Williamson (1925-), in his discussion of the means of God's providence in the Westminster Confession, draws out this connection quite explicitly.³⁷

But, there are significant problems with the very idea of a common grace, let alone its adequacy in explaining the means of providence.

First of all, the definition of common grace is vague. Richard Mouw (1940-), former professor of philosophy at Calvin College and president of Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote a book entitled, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*. In it, he begins by confessing, after forty years of studying the matter, "I am convinced that there is such a thing as common grace, but I am not very clear what it is ..."³⁸ Paul Helm admits in his book *The Providence of God*, "The phrase 'common grace' is unfortunately ambiguous,"³⁹ and casts it aside as unhelpful to understanding the subject.

Second, the Biblical proof for common grace is thin, at best. Mouw cites only five texts in his one hundred page work on the subject, four of which do not seem to have anything to do with the concept and the fifth hardly proving it.⁴⁰

Third, as a result of the first two difficulties with the common grace theory, it is not surprising that the theory is not advocated in any of the Reformed confessions or catechisms of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, in the time of greatest theological acumen in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The only mention of common grace in any of them is in the Canons

³⁶ Kuyper developed his common grace theory in three volumes, *De gemeene gratie* (Leiden: Donner, 1902-1904), now finally being translated into English in three volumes: *Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2013-). Kuyper recognized a certain danger in his concept and used a different word in Dutch for common grace ("gratie"), rather than the usual word for (saving) grace ("genade"). But the difference between the two words seems merely semantic, both referring to a positive attitude by God.

³⁷ "By means of the instruments of common grace[,] God is able to restrain the new center (ego) of man's fallen sinful nature and give considerable influence to the 'outer' remnants of man's paradise nature in the reprobate." G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 51. Henry Krabbendam waxes lyrical in praise of common grace in providence in *Sovereignty and Responsibility: The Pelagian-Augustinian Controversy in Global Philosophical Perspective* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2002), 148.

³⁸ Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 13.

³⁹ Helm, *The Providence of God*, 99. Helm seems unwilling either to embrace common grace or deny it; see especially page 100.

⁴⁰ Rev. 21:24-26; I Peter 2:11-17; 3:15-16; Jer. 29; and Luke 6:35. The last text is the only one possibly relevant to the subject of common grace.

of Dort (1619), in which the Remonstrants or Arminians are accused of and condemned for holding it, in Rejection 5 of the 3rd and 4th Heads of Doctrine.

Fourth, while some Reformed scholars both before and after Kuyper certainly believed in some kind of common grace – Calvin himself refers a handful of times in scattered places in his voluminous writings to a “general grace”, without really defining it – they do not seem to have convinced enough of their brethren⁴¹ to include it in the authoritative documents of the Reformed or Presbyterian churches.⁴² And many have opposed the theory of common grace. The Puritan Stephen Charnock (1628-1680), for one, wrote against the idea of common grace in his book *Divine Providence*: “It cannot be supposed that the Spirit, whose mission is principally for the church, should give such gifts out of love to men who hate [H]im, and are not the objects of [H]is eternal purpose[;] but [H]e hath some other ends in doing it, which is the advantage of [H]is church and people; and this God causes by the preaching of the gospel, which when it works gracious works in some, produceth common works in others for the good of those gracious ones.”

The common grace theory, then, whatever it means, goes beyond the Scriptural and confessional authority which the Reformed or Presbyterian churches have acknowledged from their inception. *

Therefore, if the natural law theory does not prove enough and if the common grace theory proves too much, is there an alternative?

Yes, we can find it in **the Mediatorial Kingship of Christ theory**, that precious doctrine worked out in the cauldron of the British Isles in the seventeenth century by the Covenanters.⁴³ As a member of the eternal Godhead, Jesus has always enjoyed an essential Kingship over the universe He created. “All things were made through Him, and without Him[,] nothing was made that was made” (John 1:3). In addition to the essential kingship, Jesus has been rewarded with the Mediatorial Kingship over the universe, for His perfect obedience in furtherance of the Divine purpose in creation and providence and salvation. The risen Christ Himself observed, “All authority on heaven and earth has been *given* to me” (Matt. 28:18); thus, Jesus believed that He then enjoyed a different kind of authority than He had enjoyed before. The apostle Paul wrote of Jesus Christ in this current age, “For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet” (I Cor. 15:25). The experience of the means God uses in providence thus can be viewed as the moving parts of one exciting whole, the mediation of Jesus Christ over all the whole universe.

⁴¹ Stephen Charnock, *Divine Providence* (Ames, Iowa: International Outreach, 2005), 67.

⁴² Due to this lack, the Christian Reformed Church of North America had to resort to *adding* to its Three Forms of Unity “Three Points of Common Grace” at its Synod meeting of 1924. This decision heightened tensions within the denomination to the extent that several ministers, many elders, and thousands of members seceded (some were deposed or suspended) to form the Protestant Reformed Churches.

⁴³ This doctrine was well-delineated in William Symington’s book, *Messiah the Prince, or, The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ* (New York: Robert Carter, 1839). Often reprinted, it has been recently abridged by J. K. Wall as *William Symington’s Messiah the Prince Revisited: The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, c2014).

*Editor’s Note: This view presented by the author does not represent the position of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary on the subject of common grace, which is consistent with the Testimony of the RPCNA (16.4) and is delineated in the article by Dr. Richard Gamble.

Furthermore, since the universe is viewed as a kingdom in the Holy Scriptures, there must be a King over the kingdom and there must be subjects within that kingdom. Each is a moral entity, with its unique role to play in that dynamic environment. The direct means of providence are the specific responsibility of King Jesus, while the indirect means of providence are the specific responsibility of mankind. Together, the direct and indirect means of providence work to preserve, govern, and sanctify, the first two over the whole universe, the last over the elect only. Together, the direct and indirect means of providence serve one purpose, to advance the reign of King Jesus until He returns, against the continuing and significant efforts of the devil and his minions.

Only such a perspective as the Mediatorial Kingship of Christ brings to the subject of the providence of God can account for the existence of the various means of Providence, and their inter-related working and orderliness.

Having defined the meaning of the means of providence and having explained the way God uses them, a third and final question arises.

What are the correct implications of the means of providence?

The doctrine of providence overall bears many implications for our life and faith, but what, more specifically, do the means of providence provide to believers?

First, we must have faith in the means God uses.

How many times have believers wished for God to use the direct means of providence against His and their enemies! Many of the Psalms cry out to God for just such redress. Psalm 35:1-4 is typical of such Psalms.

Plead *my cause*, O Lord, with those who strive with me;
Fight against those who fight against me.
Take hold of shield and buckler,
And stand up for my help.
Also[,] draw out the spear,
And stop those who pursue me.
Say to my soul, "I *am* your salvation."
Let those be put to shame and brought to dishonor
Who seek after my life;
Let those be turned back and brought to confusion
Who plot my hurt.

However, just as many Psalms encourage the believer to wait for the Lord to act by the use of the means of His providence. Psalm 27 concludes in verses 13-14,

I would have lost heart, unless I had believed
That I would see the goodness of the LORD
In the land of the living.
Wait on the LORD;
Be of good courage,
And He shall strengthen your heart;
Wait, I say, on the LORD!

We may want God to act with the direct means of providence, but usually, we must accept in faith that He is only going to work indirectly. As the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) puts it: “We do not condemn the means whereby the providence of God works, as though they were unprofitable; but we teach that we must apply ourselves unto them, as far as they are commended to us in the Word of God.”⁴⁴ We believe that Christ is Mediatorial King, no matter what our circumstances may be.

Second, we must be humbled by the means God uses.

The believer may fancy that he is so important to God that God owes the saint a particular providence, in a particular way, by a particular means. But God is usually pleased to choose a means which confounds our inflated view of ourselves and reminds us that we are merely a small part of a great whole, rather than the center and focus of it all.

Ultimately, we must acknowledge that God’s use of the means of providence remains rather mysterious to us, the direction of the divine hand is veiled to our minds, the subplots and tangents of the general movement of life are difficult to divine, and only the end result can rest clear to our minds. We are in providence, but we do not understand providence. The development of Christ’s mediatorial kingdom is not as we would plan and execute it. Calvin believed that the means of providence were “the secret things” of Deut. 29:29,⁴⁵ and the “deep abyss” of Psalm 36:16.⁴⁶ The French Confession of 1559, largely the work of Calvin himself, urges us, “When we acknowledge that nothing can be done without the providence of God, we do most humbly adore His secrets, which He has hidden from us.”⁴⁷ The Belgic Confession of 1561 claims that, “We will not curiously inquire into [providence] farther than our capacity will admit.”⁴⁸ As William Plumer (1802-1880) writes, “Let us not be curious in prying into the inscrutable secrets connected with providence.”⁴⁹ We must humble ourselves in the face of the means God chooses to use.

Third, we must be in awe at the means God uses.

Big or small, obvious or hidden, sudden or slow, the means God uses are many and are expressed in the great tapestry of life in this universe, as Jesus Christ works out His mediatorial kingship. To change the metaphor, Jesus is like the conductor of a great symphony orchestra, using the many instruments at his disposal to follow the composer’s score in order to produce a unified result that glorifies God. In the light of God’s providence, the believer, in Calvin’s words

⁴⁴ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:818-819.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:213.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:212.

⁴⁷ Found in Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 1:143. The Waldensian Confession of 1560 is very similar. *Ibid.*, 2:220.

⁴⁸ Found in *Ibid.*, 2:431.

⁴⁹ William Plumer, *Jehovah-Jireh: A Treatise on Providence* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1993), 41.

in the *Institutes*, “with becoming humility[,] submits himself to fear and reverence”⁵⁰ before God.

Moreover, God always uses the means of providence in such a way that His sovereignty and man’s responsibility are maintained in their integrity. But how can that be? The French Reformed theologian Auguste Lecerf (1872-1943) provides the answer. His pupil Pierre Marcel (1910-1992) writes,

In a striking formulation which stands tall, without the slightest contradiction, both in the theological and psychological realms, as well as in the philosophical, Professor Lecerf loved to repeat: “We believe in a God sufficiently powerful to realize freely in relation to His creatures what He wills necessarily in relation to Himself.”⁵¹

Marcel adds: “Here is the all-powerful God, the God of the Holy Scriptures. There is no other.”⁵² Properly understood, the means of providence lead us to the same conclusion.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:212.

⁵¹ Pierre Charles Marcel, *Revue Réformée* 1, no. 1 (avril 1950), 44.

⁵² *Ibid.*

He Is Not Lord Over Evil, Is He?: The Dilemma of Providence

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Introduction

The question of God's Lordship over evil came home forcefully to the western world this summer. Father Jacques Hamel was an 85 year-old French priest. On July 26, two French-born, knife-wielding Islamic radicals slit his throat while he celebrated mass at the altar of his church in Normandy.

On one hand, post Vatican II Roman Catholics are in a real bind trying to interpret what happened. Their theology, born out of the bright optimism of the 1960s, says that it is best for religion to "come of age" and to reject exclusivist ideas. They think that the Catholic religion should flourish in community with the other religions of mankind. For them to speak of Father Jacques as being a Catholic martyr might risk slipping back in to what they view as the fruitless religious struggles of the distant past. In fact, no Roman Catholic of the 1960s could have imagined that an old priest could die a martyr's death in the heart of Europe. But for a faithful Roman Catholic, this death must be viewed as a martyrdom.

On the other hand, we conservative Presbyterians, following the Westminster Divines, do not grant that a priest celebrating mass is participating in the true worship of God. But we know that our theological sophistication is entirely lost on the Islamic fanatic who is bent on shedding Christian blood. For the jihadist, it could just as well be a Presbyterian minister standing in his pulpit as it was a priest at his altar who should die a bloody death. Thus, it is legitimate to ask the question assigned whether God is Lord over such evil actions.

Background

This article follows two previous ones which, are titled: "Does God Have Free Will?: The Meaning of Providence" and "How Can God Govern All Things?: The Means of Providence."

Structure

This third article is structured with four main sections and a conclusion. The first section addresses the relationship between God's providence and evil, tracing how the Divines fashioned the fifth chapter of the Confession, "Of Providence".¹ The second section addresses the question of evil- defining and interpreting. The third is concerned with the Westminster Confession of Faith on evil and the fourth on interpreting God and evil.

¹ Chapter 5. Of Providence.

I. The Westminster Confession of Faith on Providence and Evil

A. On Providence.

WCF 5.1 teaches that God directs and disposes his creatures and their actions, from the greatest even to the least, by the immutable counsel of his own will. Therefore, within divine providence, there is no “bare permission”, no “permissive decree.”² Moving from the Confession, the Westminster Larger Catechism question 18 defines God’s works of providence: “God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory.” The Divines taught that God preserves, governs, and orders all of his creatures and their actions to a very specific end: his own glory. However, *WLC* 19 uses this phrase: “God by his providence permitted some of the angels, willfully and irrecoverably, to fall into sin and damnation...and all their sins.” The Divines connected their argument to the greater good by adding that these actions were to God’s own glory.

B. On Evil.

The *WCF* powerfully answers the question of God and evil in *WSC* 19: “All mankind, by their fall, lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever.” Relative to evil, the plain meaning of *WLC* 18’s answer on providence is that, if any person does an evil action, then somehow that action is ordered to God’s glory.

What these parts of the Westminster documents mean is that it is not that God simply permits something evil like a drunk driver to run over a child. Our God is not like a human king who can simply refrain from stopping one of his nobles from doing an evil deed. No, God the Creator and sustainer is actively involved in all events that transpire on this earth.

At the second part of chapter five the divine’s used scholastic language, implementing the difference between primary and secondary cause, to explain God’s role concerning evil.³ The Confession reads: “God orders things to fall out by necessary, free or contingent second cause.”⁴

² Wayne Spear, *Faith of Our Fathers: A Commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2006), 34: “In the view of the Bible and of the Confession, providence is the accomplishment in time of the eternal plan of God.” Paul Helm, “Westminster and Protestant Scholasticism” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century vol. 2*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan III (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor Press, 2004), 104.

³ Spear (*Faith of Our Fathers*, 35) grants that while the confession is not too “scholastic” (“overly academic and philosophical”), this section is an example of scholasticism. Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P & R Publishing, 2009), 194-95, asserts that the divines “did not argue from logic, but from the Bible.” “Their use of the distinction between primary and secondary causes ...could be said to be scholastic, in the sense that it was a category from Aristotelian philosophy, but if that was so, then virtually everyone in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including Calvin, could be labeled scholastic.” Helm writes, “Westminster and Protestant Scholasticism”, 103: “So if ‘scholasticism’ means ‘deduction from an axiom asserting the eternal decree of God’ the chapter on providence in the Confession is emphatically not a piece of scholastic theology.” Helm argues that their method is *a posteriori*, seeking, by induction, to formulate their doctrine from the scripture. He adds that this chapter does not depend upon a natural theology, or natural light or probability but is based on scripture. He concludes that: “it is precisely as used in this sense that scholastic is a presentational matter rather than theologically substantive” (107).

⁴ For more on second cause, see John Frame, *History of Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2015).

This language is helpful and precise, common in the seventeenth century, but it is foreign to English speakers three hundred fifty years after the Confession. However, we can easily translate their terms: “All events, whether they are instances of laws of nature (‘necessarily’), or of human choices (‘freely’), or of unforeseen happenings (‘contingently’) ...are in God’s direct control.” There are no events that come about because of bare permission.⁵ Humans make real decisions, yet God uses those decisions to carry out his plan.⁶

At WCF 5.4, the Confession affirms that God is almighty, to the extent that his power, wisdom, and goodness, which manifest themselves in providence, extend to Adam’s fall and to human and angelic sins. Then, to make sure that they were clear, the Divines made the difficult situation worse by adding that, because of his power, such sins are not granted by mere permission.⁷

This section screams out a profound theological question. “If God is in control of all events, and he is good, how can there be such evil?”⁸ Any intelligent reader hears the question rumbling in the back of his mind. Knowing that the *WCF*, along with its two catechisms, are meant to be both comprehensive as well as concise, they offer a clear answer to the question. Their answer was two-fold: (1) God does not just permit sin, he also limits sin⁹ and (2) God cannot be the author or approver of sin, because sin occurs for “His own holy ends.”¹⁰ Whether we decide at this point that these answers are intellectually satisfying or not, we need to move ahead to get closer to the heart of the matter. The next step is to define terms. When trying to analyze God’s relationship to evil, we need to differentiate between the concepts of sin and evil. It is from sin that evil has come.

II. The Westminster Confession of Faith on Sin

A. Define Sin

The Westminster Confession defines sin in *WSC* 14 as “any want of conformity unto or transgression of, the law of God.” *WCF* 6:6 tells us about the fruit of sin: “Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, doth, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner; whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.” Therefore, all who are sinners, which means everyone, are bound over to God’s wrath and so are subject to death and to temporal misery. Yes, our God is Lord over what we perceive as evil. Evil comes because of our sin. Having defined sin, the next question is whether we can determine from where it has come.

⁵ Helm, “Westminster and Protestant Scholasticism”, 104.

⁶ Letham, *Assembly*, 196: “God was not a passive spectator watching helplessly as men and angels rebelled.”

⁷ “The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission,” *WCF*.

⁸ Spear, *Faith of our Fathers*, 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁰ Murray, “Westminster”, 136-37.

B. Issues with Sin

Concerning sin's origin, sin is something done by creatures and has its origin in the creation, not the Creator. It originated in the angelic world and then travelled down to God's pristine creation.

Also, God is not the source of sin in any sense. This truth is taught in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. In fact, the Old Testament praises God for his goodness. It is sin that separates humans from God.¹¹ While there are component parts to human sin, knowing those various parts does not explain the origin of sin. There is no room for locating the origin of sin outside of humanity, which is plainly taught by the *WCF*.

Thus, theologians insist that sin cannot be causally determined. If we could find a cause for it, then sin and evil could be explained.¹²

III. The Westminster Confession of Faith on Evil

The Confession distinguishes between natural evil and moral evil.

A. Natural Evil

For this article, natural evil will be divided into two parts.

First, natural evil is a curse that God has placed on the world in response to sin.¹³ The very definition of evil is when the creation tries to usurp the power of the Creator. Thus, the Creator can manipulate creation to remind his creation that he, and he alone, is the Creator. Examples of this natural evil are mosquitoes, earthquakes, floods, tornados, and erupting volcanos. There is thus an intimate connection between evil, defined as God's curse on creation, and God's providence.

A second type of natural evil is death and the dissolution of the body. Death came because of sin.¹⁴ Thus, what we normally classify as evil, things such as debilitating diseases in our bodies, came not because of what God has done, but because of what we have done. Death came into the world because of our sin.

Summarizing natural evil, it is God who brings on earthquakes and tornadoes. Those who are battered and shaken by these natural events are in fact under divine wrath. Such events are only

¹¹ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 192.

¹² *Ibid.*, 193-94: "There is no explanation for sin that is humanly satisfying, save the fact that it exists, and that nothing occurs outside of God's will." 1:194: "At times, theologians have drawn improper conclusions regarding the origin of evil. Some theologians have asserted that if God wills sin, in any sense, then he must be the source of it. They then argue that since he cannot be the source of sin, it must be wrong to say that God wills sin *in any sense*. Yet that conclusion necessitates something happening that is somehow beyond God's will. Granting that there is a tension- God is not the author of sin, yet sin exists- we must not necessarily conclude that he does not will sin in any sense. God is good and holy, and at the same time he is all-powerful and all-controlling."

¹³ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 293.

¹⁴ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 185-186.

the beginnings of their sorrows. As cancer erupts in a person's body, has God brought on this illness? Of course he has, because, on one hand, the reprobate are under his wrath and curse and, on the other hand, even his children must endure death. Thus, to answer the question asked in the title, yes, God is certainly the Lord over Evil.

B. Moral Evil

First, moral evil is that which is contrasted to moral good.¹⁵ To understand moral evil, we turn to the beginning of time. Before the fall, Adam and Eve knew the difference between good and evil. Evil was to do anything that was against God's command.¹⁶ In the Garden, the thrust of the devil's temptation was to convince sinless Adam and Eve, that by committing sin and evil, they would be like God. This claim, touted by the prince of liars, was the opposite of the truth. The nature of the satanic temptation was for Adam and Eve to try to change from being creatures to becoming the all-powerful Creator.¹⁷

Second, the satanic temptation was part of God's divine plan for our first parents. Even if there had been no tempter, there would have been some type of probation or testing in the garden. God wanted Adam and Eve to love him, not for what they could get from him, but simply for who he is. Had they resisted the temptation, they would have moved from the Garden of Eden to a heavenly Garden of Eden. They would have moved to what we will have at the final consummation.

Third, God punishes evil. The *WLC* 28 says: "The punishments of sin in this world, are either inward, as blindness of mind, a reprobate sense, strong delusions, hardness of heart, horror of conscience, and vile affections: or outward, as the curse of God upon the creatures for our sake; and all other evils that befall us in our bodies, names, estates, relations, and employments; together with death itself."

Fourth, what evil is not: evil is neither an illusion nor a privation. A Christian cannot imagine evil as an illusion, but the sect called Christian Science, as well as parts of Hinduism, Buddhism, and contemporary postmoderns, argue that evil is an illusion. For them, the problem of evil simply dissolves. But their claim cannot stand.¹⁸ Moral evil is very real.

Closer to home, a number of Christian scholars argue that evil is what they term a privation. Their argument, they believe, helps to explain evil. While I do not embrace the argument, it is important enough for us to examine the theory. The term "privation" is not one that we use very often. We understand the term private, like a private conversation that is limited to a select number of participants, or private property which has only one owner. If we look up the word "privation", it is defined as "a state in which things that are essential for human well-being, such as food and warmth, are scarce or lacking." Some synonyms are deprivation, impoverishment, or need. In this view, evil is a defect, a lack of good where good should be. Thus, a rock that cannot see is not an evil, but a man who is blind suffers from the privation of vision. The big picture of evil, viewed from this perspective, is that when the world was created, everything was good. Evil is the lack or want or privation, of that good which should be there.

¹⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 292. See his *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 89-102.

¹⁶ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 175.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 175, 189-91: the fall of the angels and human sin.

¹⁸ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 284-89.

Theologians then use this argument in a philosophical fashion. They contend that God in his being is good. Evil, in contrast, is specifically a lack of being. Thus, when men sin they slip into a lower level of being, they become less perfect than God made them to be. Relative to evil, God is the efficient cause of everything good, but only what they term the “effectually permissive” cause of evil. He merely permits evil, because evil has no true being.¹⁹ We need to reject this notion of evil as privation. In the end, it does not absolve God. Having defined sin and evil, we will turn now to its interpretation.

IV. Interpreting God and Evil

A. Two Preliminary Issues.

1. God’s Common Grace²⁰

When we try to comprehend God and evil, we should begin by remembering God’s common grace. Common grace is God’s unmerited goodness to his creation which falls short of salvation. Our own sin deserves nothing but death and destruction. Yet wicked men and women can enjoy plenty of food instead of only bread and water, warm homes in the wintertime, and aspirin to dull the throb of a headache. There is a common saying among theologians: God is better to the worst of us than the best of us deserve. This goodness to all humanity is God’s common grace. Part of common grace is that God limits evil, which is specifically mentioned in the *WCF*. Men do not get to do all of the evil for which their hearts yearn. Governments, for example, function to control evil and thus are a manifestation of God’s common grace. Despite God’s common grace, we should not make the mistake of believing that God is not angry at evil and sin, which takes us to the second preliminary issue.²¹

2. God’s Reprobation

Although worthy of an article of its own, God in fact hardens hearts. *WCF* 5:6 deals with reprobation.²² First, the objects of reprobation are not innocent, cherub-like children. There are no such people. No, the reprobate are men and women who are wicked and ungodly. They have sinned, and instead of halting their sin, God permits them to roll around in it, becoming more and more deeply entwined in its wicked tentacles. This section (*WCF* 5.6) presents a sobering view of God’s providence in the lives of the wicked.²³ He blinds and hardens them.²⁴

¹⁹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 287.

²⁰ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God’s Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 236.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 292.

²² “As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous Judge, for former sins doth blind and harden, from them He not only withholdeth His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasions of sin; and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan: whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.”

²³ Spear, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 37.

²⁴ The theological question is how does God act to bring about those sinful results? See Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 293.

Let's summarize so we can approach the big theological question. God gives unmerited favor short of salvation to the reprobate, but will not leave them unpunished.

B. Sin and God's Will

The *WCF* is clear: God is active, in a negative fashion, toward the reprobate. This theology itself asks a question, do the sins of wicked men and women stand against God's will and counsel? If we answer affirmatively, "Yes, their sin is against God's will," then it appears that God must in some sense either be responsible for their sin or be so weak that he cannot control all of the events in his vast universe. Certainly, neither of those two answers can be correct.²⁵ If we say, "No, sin is not against God's will," then it appears that God in some sense wills those sins performed by the reprobate.

I will use a two-fold approach to answer this question. The first angle is the simplest: to remind us that God's perfect will is expressed in his law. When sin is defined as acts that are contrary to God's perfect law, then there is no question that sin is against his will.²⁶

The second angle is the greater good argument for the presence of evil in this world.²⁷ The greater good argument was presented in the first section of *WCF* chapter 5. The divines said: "God upholds and directs all creatures, actions, and things...by his holy providence...and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy."²⁸

To comprehend the greater good argument simply requires us to imagine a situation in which something painful is meant to be positive: the pain of surgery is meant to heal. The presence of evil in the world, when seen from this broader perspective, is somehow meant by God for something good. It is possible to imagine that God has a good purpose in permitting evil, a purpose that outweighs all of the suffering, pain, and evil that men and women experience. The divine purpose would make the world better than it would have been had it existed without evil.²⁹

We have asked the question whether God uses sin against his own will and have learned that God's will is expressed in his holy and perfect law, and sin is violation of that law. But God is free to take sinful human actions committed against his will (defined as his law) and use them for his glory. Even the Evil One will be used for God's glory. The Old Testament teaches that almighty God will use those things that appear sinful for his glory as well. Thus, when seemingly inexplicable things occur, God is still in control.³⁰

²⁵ For more information on the presence of sin and God's holy will, see *Whole Counsel of God*, 196-98.

²⁶ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 194.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁸ A. A. Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 92: "That the final end of his providence is the manifestation of his own glory."

²⁹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 289.

³⁰ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 195.

Incorrect Formulations of the Greater Good Argument

A specific argument has been made that evil is necessary for there to be an orderly universe.³¹ Another argument is that the presence of evil is necessary to make the soul strong. However, the most common argument is that evil is necessary for there to be human free will.³² There are problems with each of these arguments, and none of them are necessary.

Similar to the greater good argument, God brings good out of evil. This truth was graphically portrayed in the Old Testament. All we need to do is see God's dealings with Noah or Joseph.³³ God is lord over the devil who is evil, as God taught Job. In the New Testament, we know that, at the end of time, we proclaim God to be just. Through our human history, he has brought forth great blessings worthy of highest praise.³⁴

Drawing Everything Together

The question that was asked is whether the sin of wicked men and women stands against God's will and counsel. The answer to the question is yes. Sin is against his will as it is expressed in his law, which is a true expression of his will. On the other hand, we have learned that God uses sin for the greater good.

C. God and Sin

This article would not be complete without tackling the thorniest question of all: since God permits the sin of the wicked to occur, then, is God the author of sin, the passive permitter of sin, or the cause of sin? Answering this question is a most difficult task.³⁵

First, God Is Not the Author of Sin

We cannot say that God is the author of sin, even if someone presents this argument: "if God controls everything, then he must be the author of sin." The New Testament teaches at James 1:13 that "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one." It is essential to maintain that God has decreed all, but is not the author of all that is. Satan and his host are the true "authors" of some sins, although God created them and decreed their sin without himself being the author of them.³⁶ God has a role in bringing about evil and, in doing so, he is still holy and blameless. He brings evil to pass without committing or authoring sin.³⁷

³¹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 289.

³² *Ibid.*, 290.

³³ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 315, 336, 386.

³⁴ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, "...in the last day, God's justice, mercy, and righteousness will be so plain to all that nobody will accuse him of wrongdoing." "From the evils of history he has brought unquestionable good worthy of the highest praise."

³⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 292.

³⁶ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Philadelphia: P&R, 1964), 50.

³⁷ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 294: "So in bringing sin to pass, he does not himself commit sin. ...a Reformed doctrine of the sovereignty of God does not imply that God is the author of sin."

Second, God Permits Sin³⁸

Arminians use the word “permit”, relative to God and evil, and for them the word means that God does not cause sin. Of course, for them, God permits sin because the human actor chooses sin, and God refuses to override that sovereign human autonomy. Since Arminians use the word “permit” in that fashion, Reformed theologians are reluctant to say that God “permits” sin at all. However, we noted that the Westminster documents used it at *WLC* 19. The divines probably used “permit” as a more delicate term than “cause”, in that God hates evil. Reformed theologians may use the word “permit” to apply to God’s ordination of sin.³⁹

Third, God as Cause of Sin

Some Bible believing Christians reject the notion of God as the cause of sin because it is difficult to separate the notion of cause from that of author. If he is the cause of sin, then the question is: How is that different from being the author of sin? Others say that God is not the cause of sin and evil by reverting to define evil as privation, an avenue that should be rejected. The way that Calvin handled the question in the *Institutes* was by differentiating the words “cause” and “ordination”. God is not the cause of sin, Calvin argued, but it is by his ordination.

The Problem

However, having gone through this analysis, having examined all of these possible relationships that God may have to sin, the question remains: “Is even granting divine permission for sin some not form of ordination or causation when it comes to the being of God almighty?”⁴⁰ The problem is that, while no humble believer argues that God is the author of sin, there appears to be no honest escape from the notion that God, in some sense, causes sin, whether by his direct ordination or some type of weaker permission. Simply put, no one is candidly satisfied by the answer, “Well God ordains evil, but he is not the author or cause of it in any sense.” In fact, it is intellectually impossible for us to imagine that God can permit evil without ordaining it.⁴¹

The Solution

However, there is a Biblical solution to the problem. The solution is found at Paul’s teaching in Romans 9:19-21, the only place where the Bible directly addresses the problem of evil.⁴² Paul taught: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?”

The solution to the problem of God as Lord of evil is in comprehending the difference between the Creator and creature. God is transcendent above creation and in a different moral category than humanity. He is the one to judge moral good and evil on the last day. God is the one who

³⁸ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 296.

³⁹ Ibid., 297: “It is right...to use permission to apply to God’s ordination of sin.”

⁴⁰ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 298: “Permission, then, is a form of ordination, a form of causation.”

⁴¹ Ibid., 298: “It is not a solution to say that God ordains evil, but doesn’t author or cause it...” “The problem of evil asks how God can ordain evil without authoring it.” “Nor is it a solution to say that God permits, rather than ordains, evil.

⁴² Ibid., 298.

rebukes those human beings, like Job, who question him. Our Lord is not subject to the evaluation of his creatures. He said by the mouth of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 45:7: "I form the light and create darkness, I make well being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things."⁴³ When we turn to the New Testament, we have to ask about the evils that happened to the Sinless One. Acts 4:27-28 records that some humans "...gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."⁴⁴ The greatest evil ever done, killing the sinless Son of God, came about by God's absolute cause and determination.

To assert God's transcendence in the area of morality, as I am arguing, is not the same as saying that God is *ex lex*: that he is not subject to the moral law. Some theologians wrongly argue that, since God is above the moral law, he is not subject to it. But that is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of God and his law. The law is grounded in his character, and God will never violate his own character.⁴⁵

Thus, it is not theologically incorrect to say that, when God, who is almighty, permits sin and evil, it is for him to ordain those events.⁴⁶ More precisely, "God not only permits sinful acts," writes A. A. Hodge, "but he directs and controls them to the determination of his own purposes."⁴⁷ Furthermore, the sinfulness of those evil acts comes from the sinning agent. God does not approve of their acts nor is he the author. In fact, the Scriptures teach that God restrains and controls men in their sins, he forbids sin by positive law, he discourages sin by threatenings and actual punishment, and he restrains sin and at times overrules it for good.⁴⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, when God brings about evil and suffering, either for the wicked or for the righteous, he has a good purpose. This argument is the greater good argument. Joseph testified that this is so for the righteous in Genesis 50:20, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." And Paul testified to the same truth in Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Paul elaborated on the idea a few verses later (8:35-39), when he said that neither tribulation nor distress, neither persecution nor famine, not even the sword, can separate us from Christ's love. God's promises and love make us conquerors even over death, for nothing can separate believers from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The Confession as both a clear and practical document, actually addressed these evils in the believer's life. At *WCF* 5.5, the Divines dealt with the question of spiritual desertion.⁴⁹ They address what appears to us to be an evil: when God "oftentimes leaves for a season his own

⁴³ Translated in some versions as "I make peace and create evil."

⁴⁴ Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 49-50.

⁴⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 299.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 296: "...it is not wrong to say that God causes evil and sin."

⁴⁷ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 100.

⁴⁸ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 100.

⁴⁹ Letham, *Assembly*, 197.

children to manifold temptations...” The Divines rightly say that the reason is “to chastise them for their former sin, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption...that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself...and for sundry other just and holy ends.” The apparent evils from God’s hand are for good ends.

This teaching parallels the following section that we already examined concerning reprobation. Believers commit sin, and God chastises them for that sin. For the reprobate, given the same situation, people sin, but in their case, God blinds and hardens. So the bitter chastisements that come to us in this life, while they appear evil to us, are meant to humble us (which is a good thing) and to raise us up to a closer dependence upon God (also a good thing).

At *WCF* 17:3, we learn that, when we fall into grievous sins (because of our own fault), we incur God’s displeasure and can be deprived of grace and divine comfort and can also bring temporal judgment upon ourselves. At *WCF* 18:4, we learn that we can be brought to the door of utter despair. The reasons for such actions on God’s part are our negligence in preserving in salvation by falling into a special sin after a sudden temptation, and God’s then withdrawing the light of his countenance from upon us.

The greater good argument underscores that the greatest good in the universe is God’s glory. Even the damnation of the wicked brings glory to God. God is glorified when sinners are judged, and God has promised that what brings glory to him will eventually bring benefits to believers.⁵⁰ Yes, the Lord brings suffering into our lives, but that does not give us the right to make accusations against him, and in bringing evil, he never does evil himself.⁵¹ God faithfully preserves his people through persecution and “honors our suffering by uniting it to Christ’s sufferings.”⁵²

Furthermore, the full goodness of God’s plan will only be manifest at the end of redemptive history. There is a promise in the Book of Revelation that, in the last day, we will confess God’s righteousness.⁵³

Finally, the Westminster Divines, with their great depth of analysis, do not attempt to explain the nature of those divine actions which are concerned in the origin of sin, nor do they attempt to explain God’s control of the sinful actions of his creatures in the execution of his purposes.⁵⁴ Their reticence about doing so is good because, brothers and sisters, we do not have to justify God’s ways.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 291.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁵⁴ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 99.

⁵⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 292.

What about My Suffering?: The Pattern of Providence

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Introduction

The Book of Job is often regarded as a lesson on how a faithful man should endure hardship while trusting in the good providence of God. It is that, to be sure, but Job is much more than a fine example of faithful patience in suffering. If we see Job as he is meant to be seen – not just as an example to follow in dealing with our sufferings, but as a prophetic prefigurement of the sufferings of Christ – we gain a much greater perspective on the meaning and purpose of suffering in the life of faith. This paper will do two things: first, establish that Job is a type of Christ who foreshadowed the redemptive suffering of our Savior, and second, examine how this perspective gives us great comfort in the life of faith when we suffer hardship ourselves.

Old Testament Typology

The Pattern

We begin by noting that typology in the Old Testament often consists not in isolated images frozen in time, but in recurring historical patterns that become progressively familiar, until they reach their crescendo in the New Testament. The analogy that exists between type and antitype often becomes a historical pattern with progressive manifestations. G. W. H. Lampe identified this feature of typology as “the tracing of the constant principles of God’s working in history, revealing a recurrent rhythm in past history which is taken up more fully and perfectly in Gospel events.”¹ The historical pattern, or “recurrent rhythm”, which is one key to understanding the Book of Job, is what we may call “The Messianic Trajectory.” It is the prophetic experience of being cast down from an established exalted position to the depths of undeserved humiliation, and then to be exalted by the hand of God to a place of even higher honor than the beginning.

This trajectory of experience is identified by Christ as a summary of His life and a pattern of Old Testament prophecy:

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

Thus Jesus rebuked the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and gave them what was undoubtedly the greatest lesson on the Old Testament ever taught. Though we may wish for a transcript of His lesson, His main points are still preserved for us. The first is that Moses, the prophets, and “all the Scriptures” are about the Lord Jesus Christ. This must be our expectation

¹ G. W. H. Lampe, “The Reasonableness of Typology,” in *Essays on Typology*, G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, eds. (Naperville: A.R. Allenson, 1957), 27.

and our presupposition when reading the Old Testament, including the Book of Job. To read it in any other way is to misread it.

Humiliation and Exaltation

The second is that the Old Testament lays a particular stress on the sequence of Christ's suffering and entrance into glory, that is, His humiliation and His exaltation. This precise emphasis of the Old Testament is also confirmed by Peter, who characterized all the prophets as testifying to "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (I Peter 1:11). This trajectory of experience is summarized and emphasized again by the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:5-11:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore, God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

If Christ and the apostles could point to this pattern of experience as the essence of Old Testament prophecy, and a summary of the Savior's work, we may expect to find portrayals of this pattern in the Old Testament that foreshadow the Lord Jesus Christ, and in such a way that we should be able to answer the question, "Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" (Luke 24:26).

When we turn to the Old Testament, we find the literary prophecies of Christ replete with this emphasis on suffering followed by exaltation. For instance, in the wondrous Servant Song of Isaiah 53, "He was oppressed and He was afflicted" (vs. 7) is followed by the Father's vow to exalt Him: "Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great..." (vs. 12). The Psalms are saturated with this pattern of experience, where the voice of distress gives way to the triumph of exaltation and praise. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" (Ps. 22:1) leads to "I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You" (Ps. 22:22). Many prophecies of Christ emphasize either His humiliation or His exaltation, but the overall prophetic picture is of suffering leading to glory.

The Example of Joseph

When we turn to the actual history of the Old Testament, which is the realm of typology, we see the pattern of this experience emerge as a recurring theme of redemptive history. There are several prominent figures whose lives can be summarized by the experience of being cast down from an established position to the depths of undeserved humiliation, then to be exalted by God to a place of even higher honor than the beginning.

The story of Joseph is one of the longest and most elaborate in Old Testament narrative, and it is built upon this pattern of experience. Joseph began life as the favored son of his father, but his envious brothers tore him away from his privileged position, casting him into a pit, selling him into slavery, and faking his death (Gen. 37). Joseph sunk lower still in his affliction, and was sent to prison, when the wife of his Egyptian master wrongly accused him of making advances (Gen. 39). Through all his trials, however, the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy (Gen. 39:21). From a prison cell, he began his miraculous rise to second in command of Egypt, when his God-given ability to interpret dreams brought him favor with Pharaoh (Gen. 41). God's purpose in Joseph's humiliation and exaltation was ultimately salvific – to save the lives

of his family “by a great deliverance,” in providing them with food during a severe famine (Gen. 45:5-7).

The story of Joseph certainly reflects the messianic trajectory of undeserved suffering followed by divine exaltation. Is this pattern alone enough for us to see Joseph as a formal type of Christ? There are some who think so, like Patrick Fairbairn². At the very least, it is clear that the pattern of humiliation leading to exaltation is the very essence of Joseph’s story, and part of a larger pattern in redemptive history that would come to its fruition in Christ.

The Example of King David

An even sharper example comes from the life of King David, whom the New Testament writers indisputably see as a type of Christ. As a younger brother, like Joseph, David began life with the humble work of a shepherd until he was anointed king by Samuel (I Sam. 16). Saul, the jealous and vengeful king whom David was to replace, persecuted him and forced him into hiding, until eventually David lived the life of an outcast among the Philistines (I Sam. 27). Hiding in caves and living on the run, David characterized his existence as being only a step away from death (I Sam. 20:3). From this low point of humiliation and unjust persecution, God propelled David to the height of kingship over a united Israel, and furthermore promised him that his Son would sit on his throne forever (II Sam. 7:12-16).

The Psalms vividly portray the humiliation and exaltation that David experienced, and in such a way that his words point directly to the experience of the Savior. In fact, there is hardly a Psalm of David that does not contain something of the sequence of suffering leading to grace, and the New Testament writers quote these Psalms more than any other portion of the Old Testament as prophecies of Christ. As a prophet and a type of Christ, David lived through and wrote about the extremes of humiliation and exaltation, which his greater Son would experience in full.

The Example of Job

Turning, then, to the Book of Job, we see yet another example – perhaps the clearest example of all – of the messianic trajectory of experience. Job is introduced to us Melchizedek-like, without genealogy, as a man who was “greatest of all the people of the east,” (Job 1:3). In God’s own estimation, there was “none like him on earth” (Job 1:8). Job was rich in earthly possessions, but known even more for his exemplary life, being characterized by the narrator of the Book, and by God Himself, as being “blameless and upright” (Job 1:1, 8). The story begins with Job living an ideal existence, pious and prosperous beyond any other man on earth, and enjoying the unique favor of God.

Job is, then, all at once, cast down to such depths of suffering and humiliation that no other man had theretofore experienced. This change was no gradual run of providential difficulties; Job’s entire world came crashing down in a moment. He lost his family, his health, and his

² Fairbairn writes, “Especially in the history of Joseph, the representative of the covenant in its earlier stage, was there given a wonderful similitude of Him in whom its powers and blessings were to be concentrated in their entire fullness, and who was therefore in all things to obtain the preeminence among His brethren. Like Joseph, the son of Mary, though born among brethren after the flesh, was treated as an alien; envied and persecuted even from His infancy, and obliged to find a temporary refuge in the very land that shielded Joseph from the fury of his kindred. His supernatural and unblemished righteousness continually provoked the malice of the world, and at the same time received the most unequivocal tokens of the divine favor and blessing. It was that righteousness, exhibited among the greatest trials and indignities, in the deepest debasement, and in worse than prison-house affliction, which procured His elevation to the right hand of power and glory, from which He was thenceforth to dispense the means of salvation to the world.” *Typology*, (Kregel Classics, 2000) I, 325.

possessions. His wife and his friends turned on him. He was brought to a point where he literally had nothing left to lose but his life, and there he sat in an ash heap, scraping his diseased skin with a potsherd, wondering why he was still alive.

Throughout his long, poetic argument with his friends, Job maintained his innocence in the face of their accusations. Just as Christ was “numbered among the transgressors,” (Luke 22:37), or accused of being a sinner, Job’s friends also accused him of great sin, even though God Himself called Job “blameless and upright.” When the Lord finally spoke, Job’s friends were rebuked and Job was justified. At the end of the book, just as in the beginning, the Lord owned Job as “My servant” (1:8; 42:7), which reappears as a favorite messianic title in the Servant Songs of Isaiah.

At the conclusion of the Book of Job, we find that “the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before” (Job 42:10), and “the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning” (Job 42:12). His family was restored, his flocks were doubled, and he lived another one hundred and forty years, seeing his children’s children to four generations. If, in the beginning, Job was the greatest man in the east, and there was none else like him on earth, his later years of life must have been nothing short of idyllic – even glorious.

There is nothing ordinary about this story. It is extreme in every way. Job was not an average believer who learned to cope with hardship by trusting in the Lord. He was the greatest, most pious man on the earth, who experienced more undeserved suffering than any man had ever endured, and who was finally exalted by God to twice the status he enjoyed before. While Joseph’s rise from a dungeon to Pharaoh’s right hand is remarkable, and David’s elevation from outcast to king is extraordinary, the story of Job truly has no earthly equal. Here we see the sequence of humiliation and exaltation in its extreme. It is not a providential process, as with other Old Testament examples. Job’s experience moved from extreme to extreme, in such a way that there is no doubt that God’s hand moved these events directly and purposefully. Job was divinely moved from the outermost limits of the human experience of suffering on earth, to the outermost limits of the human experience of blessing on earth – all as if to illustrate something *beyond* the limits of human experience.

We have defined the “Messianic Trajectory” as the prophetic experience of being cast down from an established, exalted position to the depths of undeserved humiliation, then to be exalted by the hand of God to a place of even higher honor than the beginning. The imprint of this experience is all over the Old Testament, with greater or lesser clarity, but nowhere does it seem clearer than in the Book of Job. The extremity of Job’s experience is only outmatched by Christ, who was at first “equal with God,” who then “became obedient to the point of death,” and was subsequently given “the name which is above every name” (Phil 2:5-11).

Thus, the Book of Job is far more than an encouraging story of the perseverance of faith. It is that, but its depth of meaning reaches to the very heart of the Gospel and our hope in Jesus Christ. That such a prominent and unique book of the Old Testament would be devoted to the prefigurement of Christ’s sufferings points to how greatly our salvation depends on this aspect of His work.

Every sin deserves the wrath and curse of God in this life and the next.³ Sin and suffering do not occur in a simplistic 1:1 ratio in this world as Job’s friends suggested, and the far greater part of God’s justice is reserved for the last great day. However, we must remember that sin *deserves* God’s wrath in this life, and it is only by God’s mercy that every sinner does not suffer as Job

³ Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 84: What doth every sin deserve? Every sin deserveth God’s wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come. (Eph. 5:6; Gal. 3:10; Lam. 3:39; Matt. 25:41).

did, or worse (Rom. 2:4). The Savior had to die for our sins because “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), but the suffering He endured leading up to His death was also an essential part of bearing the consequences of our sin. Thus, the Scriptures connect both the suffering and death of Christ as two essential parts of His one great work of salvation. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit” (I Pet. 3:18). Christ said again and again that He “must suffer many things” (Matt. 16:21; Mark 9:12; Luke 17:25), and that it was *necessary* for the Christ to suffer (Luke 24:46). The sufferings of Christ are therefore a central aspect of the gospel in apostolic preaching: “But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled” (Acts 3:8; cf. Acts 1:3; 17:3; 26:23). The grievous suffering that Christ endured in His flesh was a necessary part of His bearing the consequences of the sins of His people. The Book of Job is a glorious, prophetic testimony to this aspect of Christ’s work. Job, as a type of Christ, suffered a taste of what every sinner deserves and what Christ ultimately endured on our behalf.

As the eventual exaltation of Job foreshadowed, the sufferings of Christ led to “the glories that would follow” (I Pet. 1:11), namely, His resurrection, ascension, and session at the right hand of God. In this experience of suffering leading to glory, we, like Job, are united to Christ by faith. To some degree we will partake of Christ’s sufferings in this life, but only as an antecedent to the glory we have been promised. Paul said that we, by faith, are heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ, “if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Rom. 8:17). Peter said, “But rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (I Pet. 4:13). Being united to Christ by faith, the believer may expect to experience something of the “trajectory” of suffering leading to glory. This pathway Christ took, and His disciples are not above their Master. The hardships we may endure will never approximate those of Christ, or even Job, but, once we belong to Christ, we never suffer outside of Him. We partake of His sufferings as a testimony that we abide in him. Upon reading the Book of Job we may give thanks always that we suffer so little in comparison, but we have the great assurance that any hardships we do endure are a brief precursor to the eternal glory that we are promised in Christ: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). Job’s story is a source of great assurance that this is true. For the believer, every hardship has the seed of glory in it. Each trial bears testimony in our hearts that we are united to Christ. There is no pointless suffering in the life of faith. The experience of Job, and ultimately that of Christ, teaches us that the gift of glory is both affirmed and perfected through the patient endurance of what trials God may appoint. “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (I Cor. 4:17). Our affliction is *working for us*, not against us.

We may surmise that in many ways Job was a “changed man” after his hardships were over. One can only imagine what sympathy was opened up in his heart for others who suffer in this world. This sensitivity is found in the One whom Job foreshadowed. Scripture tells us that because Christ suffered as a true man, He has a knowing compassion upon us when we suffer any trial or temptation in Him. “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). The sympathy of our Savior is born of His own experience of suffering, and is thus full of personal compassion. Job experienced the blundering attempts of “miserable comforters” to speak about things they never experienced. The compassion of Christ on His people is just the opposite. He has gone through the vale of tears and experienced human anguish at its greatest. He can truly sympathize with our weaknesses and provide exactly what grace and comfort are needed in our lives. Scripture tells us that our consolation in Christ will always meet the measure of our need: “For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ” (II Cor. 1:5). The Book of Job is a prophetic testimony to the depth of suffering that brought forth the boundless sympathy of our great High Priest.

Finally, we turn to the lone mention of Job in the New Testament, where he is held out to us as an example of patience and perseverance:

My brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed, we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord – that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful. (Jas. 5:10, 11)

It is noteworthy that James refers us to all the prophets, then singles out only Job by name. Not only is Job counted among the prophets, but he is viewed as is the greatest example among them when it comes to the patient endurance of suffering. So, while Job is not mentioned in the “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11, he is the only one mentioned by name in the “Hall of Patience” in James 5.

If Job is an example of the patient endurance of suffering, he is so only because he reflects the perfect patience of Christ, which we too are called to reflect. The apostle’s prayer for believers is that the Lord would direct our hearts “into the love of God and into the patience of Christ” (II Thess. 3:5). As we partake of the sufferings of Christ, we are called to partake of His patience as well. This fruit of the Spirit is ours to receive, as the example of Job will forever remind us.

While Job’s outcries sometimes seem incongruous with patience, we are reminded (as we are in the Psalms) that the frank expressions of the heart have a place in our prayers. Job was nothing if not honest about his pain, fears, and frustrations. This openness did not mitigate what he knew to be true: that God is to be praised at all times (Job 1:21), and that adversity is to be patiently received from His hand (Job 2:10). Suffering may tempt us to question God in our unguarded moments, but there is always an objective truth to which we can return and find rest. It is the truth taught everywhere in Scripture and cited by James as the crowning lesson of the Book of Job – “the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.”

Perhaps the better part of Job’s patience consisted in trust. Even though he could not fathom why he suffered so grievously, Job’s trust in God was relentless. He was resolved to trust in the Lord and what He was doing, even to death. “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15). Job could not see the purpose behind his suffering, but he knew there was a purpose. Perhaps he did not see the full dimensions of his typological experience, but he knew his anguish and pain were not meaningless. He was resolved to trust in God’s good purpose, even if it were inscrutable.

From the vantage point of the New Testament, we have the blessing of knowing the purpose behind our trials and struggles. They are meant to add perseverance to our faith and produce the fruit of patience. The apostle said, “...we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3). James likewise says, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (Jas. 1:3, 4). The “glory” of Paul and the “joy” of James are often hard to grasp in our darkest moments, but they begin with trust – obstinate trust – that the Lord is using our trials to ultimately bring us to glory. Remember that even our Savior Himself was made “perfect through suffering” (Heb. 2:10). For our part, we must make it our purpose to grow in faith and patience through whatever trials we encounter, trusting that this indeed is God’s purpose.

Both James and Paul mention patience or perseverance as the fruit of tribulation. Too often, trials produce *impatience* within us. We pray and hope for the trial to end as soon as possible, without letting patience “have its perfect work.” No one hopes to have the trials of life

prolonged, but there is a purpose to their timespan. Patience – of all things – is not learned quickly. Perseverance of faith cannot be penciled into our schedules. To recognize this truth is, perhaps, part of what it means to *accept* adversity (Job 2:10). Our first impulse is to reject it, and pray that God would move heaven and earth to bring our adversity to a hasty conclusion. But we must remember that Paul’s golden chain of tribulation, perseverance, character, and hope is a process in which each element begets the next in due time, and there are no shortcuts.

Conclusion

The Book of Job reminds us how little we actually see of the big picture of God’s work in our lives, and how only trust can fill the great gaps in our vision. The prologue of Job gives us a privileged glimpse into the origin and purpose of Job’s trials, but Job and his friends, for their part, were wrestling in the dark. When they dared to explain what they did not know, they exposed themselves to the hurtful consequences of misconstruing God’s work. As Derek Kidner put it so well, the Book of Job shows “how small a part of any situation is the fragment we see; how much of what we do see we ignore or distort through preconceptions; and how unwise it is to extrapolate from our elementary grasp of truth.”⁴ There is a plan and purpose behind all that happens in our lives, but like Job, we do not get to read the blueprint ahead of time. The glorious day will come when we will see, in retrospect, the perfect goodness and wisdom of God at every turn in our life story, but until that day comes, it is our part to patiently and persistently trust that “all things work together for good to those who love God” (Rom. 8:28).

The Book of Job is meant to cause our faith, love, and thankfulness to abound toward our suffering Savior. We must read Job’s story as being “passionately and profoundly about Jesus, whom Job foreshadows both in his blamelessness and perseverance through undeserved suffering.”⁵ It is therefore a book that is also meant to produce in us “the patience of Christ” (II Thess. 3:5) whenever we suffer hardship, so that we too, like Job, may reflect something of this crowning attribute of the Savior. There are no more types of Christ being sent by God into this world; the shadows have given way to the reality. Yet, in a very real way, we are called to reflect Jesus Christ in our lives through patient trust in the Father’s will. The typology that made Job so unique is now brought down to the plane of our common calling in Christ. If we endure any hardship with the patience of Christ, trusting His promise that our suffering will lead to glory, we may take our place alongside Job among those who are counted blessed who endure (Jas. 5:11).

⁴ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1985), 61.

⁵ Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 436.

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.