

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—
Lesson 9—The Doctrine of God’s Providence, Q. 11

- I. The doctrine of *God’s providence* is the necessary consequence of the doctrine of *God’s creation of all things* and therefore extends itself as far as the creation—for what is providence but the *preservation and governance* of all those things which God created. “Providence includes all God’s activities in relation to His creatures of every kind subsequent to their creation.” (Hodge)
 - A. The doctrine declares that God is essentially *omnipresent and active* at the same time and in unbroken continuity with *all* His creatures.
 - B. Hodge “The word providence means to *see beforehand* (latin: *pro + video*, literally: *foresight*), and then to *exercise* all that care and control which God’s infinite *pre-vision* of His own ends and His knowledge of His appointed instrumentalities may suggest.” However, in common usage the word is usually restricted to mean “the execution by God, of His eternal decree in time, by means of the second causes He originated in creation.”
 1. And so we have this relationship: God’s *foreordination* establishes a plan that’s eternal, all-comprehensive, and unchangeable. By *creation*, God commences all things in time. And then by *providence*, He does two things: 1) *preserves* all created things and 2) *governs* them so that *all* the ends for which they were created are infallibly accomplished and realized.
- II. The providence of God is according to one immutable, infallible, and universal plan, Eph 1.11
 - A. This plan is God’s all-comprehensive decree (WSC 7-8). “It’s one intellectual system, logically coherent in all its parts, comprehending in one system all beings and events in all worlds, material and spiritual, natural and supernatural.”
 1. Whether natural or supernatural, ordinary, gracious, or miraculous, the works of God’s providence must all be the execution of *one single indivisible plan*. There can be no *real* incongruities or antagonisms between the natural and supernatural or between ordinary providence and grace. As God sees the end from the beginning and appoints *all* the instrumentalities to get from the one to the other, it’s *impossible* for there to be any surprises, repentance/regret, or change of plan, Num 23.19
 2. *All* that God purposes, in parts and parcels from our point of view, must yet still be only *one purpose*. *All* that He does, by whatever means or at whatever point, must be the execution of *the one purpose* and must therefore constitute *one harmonious system*, Rom 8.28; Ps 115.2-3
 3. *How does this truth comfort you when things appear to be incongruous? or when His promises appear to have no possible way of being fulfilled? or when everything in nature and everyone in life is set on your utter ruin? or when everything you hoped in and leaned upon is dashed to pieces?
 - B. God’s providence is exercised in three ways:
 1. *Naturally*, utilizing second causes and created laws to sustain the material universe.
 2. *Morally*, governing all intelligent and moral creatures by commands and motives and by His Word.
 3. *Supernaturally*, embracing all the work of redemption, including the incarnation, the revelation of Holy Scripture, the inspiration of the prophets and apostles, miracles to authenticate their commission, and the gracious work of His Spirit in the hearts of His redeemed people.
 4. *Nevertheless*, God’s providence is but *one harmonious work* in which the natural, moral, and supernatural all fit and work together in the preserving and governing of all things, material and spiritual, temporal and eternal all by His own hand, according to His one Plan, and for His own glory. “Providence includes His general or natural governance, embracing the universe as one system and operating through the uniformities of natural law, and His special or supernatural

governance, acting upon and modifying the action of second causes from without in the form of miracle and of grace.” (Hodge)

- C. This plan must be *universal*. It must comprehend every agent and every event without the least discontinuity or exception. God does not come down from above upon the course of our lives in spots, but governs every link of the chain.
1. One event is never in any degree more providential than any other event.
 - a) *Your comfortable providences are just as providential and just as wisely and kindly and lovingly appointed as your uncomfortable ones! Your heavenly Father was not less concerned in the one than in the other or less sure of the one than the other.
 - b) *It’s irreligious of us to treat the natural things of life with such careless disregard as if God were not graciously and lovingly involved in them and then only think of God as caring for us when some marked deliverance or provision occurs.
 - c) *We often say of some deliverance from danger, “that was providential!” But would it have been any less providential if we’d been destroyed and not delivered? Would it have been any less providential if we’d not been in trouble at all and had no need of deliverance?
 - (1) *Story of the man who rushed into Dr. Witherspoon’s presence crying, “Dr. Witherspoon, help me to thank God for His wonderful providence! My horse ran away, my buggy was dashed to pieces on the rocks, and behold! I am unharmed.” To which he laughingly replied, “Why I know a providence a thousand times better than yours. I have driven down that rocky road to Princeton hundreds of times, and my horse never ran away and my buggy was never dashed to pieces.”
 2. However various the events, however the method of the divine operation in them, in them all the one true and living God is equally present with His absolute perfections and in His supreme power. Events may be infinitely different in their significance as well as in their importance to us; but the truly believing mind finds equally in all things—even the least significant and the least important, the presence, control, and benevolent administration of our heavenly Father.

III. God’s providence involves two main elements:

A. Preservation:

1. Just as no creature can bring itself into existence so no creature can sustain itself or continue to exist a single moment unless upheld by the almighty power and goodness of God, Heb 1.3
2. All *created* existence forever continues to be *dependent* existence, Col 1.17; Acts 17.28; Ps 104.24-30.
3. God’s sovereign and omnipotent preservation of all things *doesn’t* invalidate the separate objective existence of His creation *or* take anything away from the real efficiency of these created elements as second causes. *It simply affirms* that they’re essentially and continuously dependent existences and causes. *The precise *nature* of how the infinite God interacts with His creation to *uphold and sustain it* is simply inscrutable.

B. Governance:

1. To say that God governs all things is to say that He controls all the activities of all His creatures of every kind directing them toward the fulfilling of His one eternal plan.
2. Nothing He made can exist on its own. Nothing is running on autopilot. Nothing has gone rogue. He remains Sustainer and Governor of all things for His own glory.

IV. God’s preserving and governing must be:

A. Consistent with His own nature (holy, wise, powerful, etc. cf. WSC 4)

1. The whole of God’s providence in every part must be a faithful and beautiful expression of His essential perfections, His infinite wisdom and power, and His absolute righteousness and benevolence.
2. Nothing can be a surprise to His intelligence, or too complicated for His wisdom, or too difficult for His power, or inconsistent with His perfect righteousness or love.

3. *That there are apparent incongruities to our eyes, we must admit. But we've learned to read all the course of providence in the light of the cross. "In the light of Calvary we have in impregnable assurance that the Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is unlimited in wisdom and power, and that He can do no wrong. Bowing our heads in unquestioning submission to His sovereign rights, and with confidence in His absolute perfection, we exclaim, in the face of all apparent anomalies, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgements and His ways past finding out!" Rom 11.33-36
- B. Consistent with the nature of the creature governed
1. He governs *matter* in consistency with the laws of matter which He imposed upon them.
 2. He governs *living creatures* in consistency with the laws of life which He created for them, *brute animals* in consistency with the natural instincts with which He created them, *and men and angels* in consistency with their rational natures and the freedom of their wills.
 - a) He works *in* the wills of men from within, making them willing in the day of His power (Ps 110.3; Phil 2.13; Mk 9.24; Ezk 36.26-27; Ps 86.11; Jer 32.40)
 - b) He works *on* the wills of men from without, by presenting motives, arguments, persuasions, threatenings, promises, appeals to reason and conscience, etc.
 - c) Thus *He governs* while *the wills of men remain perfectly free and responsible*.
 3. "All His creatures and all their actions." *God continually controls and directs the actions of all His creatures, so that while He never violates the law of their several natures, He yet infallibly causes all actions and events, singular and universal, to occur according to the eternal and immutable plan embraced in His decree.
 4. **In short, the doctrine of providence affirms:** "that there's *a design* in providence. God has chosen His great end—the manifestation of His own glory. But in order to that end He has chosen innumerable subordinate ends. These are fixed. And He has appointed all actions and events in their several relations as means to those ends; and He continually so directs the actions of all creatures that all these general and special ends are brought to pass precisely at the time, by the means, and in the mode and under the conditions, which He from eternity proposed." (Hodge)
- C. The word "chance" simply expresses a relation. An event happens to us "by chance" when the causes of it are so complex or so unusual that they're incapable of rational explanation by us.
1. But as far as God goes, there's no such thing as chance. As far as we're concerned, many things fall into the category of chance. But by faith we embrace and accept *all events* as the excellent and praiseworthy will of our heavenly Father, Ps 104.31-35
 2. Creation and providence are the preparatory works that culminate in the work of redemption, so that we read *all the means* in the light of *the glorious end* in store for God's people, Rev 21-22

Questions

1. Can God's providences in life be a sure guide for our duties? Why or why not?
 - 1.1. Providences *show God's path* rather than *point out ours*. It's not His purpose, hidden in a decree or fulfilled in a providence, that serves as our rule of faith and life, but His Word (WSC 2-3).
 - 1.2. "We are not to venture out merely by the light of providences; for we shall find that oftentimes providences serve as fair occasions for sinning (cf. Jonah). Therefore never be ruled by providences, as they may be temptations or probations; but be ruled by the Word of God alone"—and a clear conscience, Isa 8.19-20; Rom 14.23. (Goodwin)
2. Can you say by faith that *all things*, however dark and inexplicable, are expressions of your Father's good will for you?
3. When you find great difficulty accepting the Lord's providence, what is it that's standing in your way?
4. *Why do we rejoice when God's providence aligns with what we want but complain when it doesn't? Is our will and desires to be the rule of His providence?!
5. Memorize WSC 11 along with Eph 1.11; Neh 9.6; Rom 8.28