

The Westminster Confession of Faith

Lesson 17: Of Providence (¶ 6 – 7)

High Plains Fellowship PCA

December 25, 2022

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Introduction

As we conclude our study of Chapter 5, we'll be considering some important matters that regard election and reprobation. In short, we have a natural desire to understand why some receive the word of God with joy and why others reject it with indifference or hostility.

The chapter finishes on a beautiful note of encouragement for all the beleaguered saints: *God takes special care of his church and brings good out of all her suffering*. As he cares for his individual saints, so he cares for his church—and he will bring her through every trial until the day of his return.

Opener

- How do we explain why some people are receptive to the truth and others are put off by it?
- Why would anyone reject the offer of the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life—especially when the alternative is an eternity of judgment?
- In your own life, what evidence do you see—even as a Christian!—that you do not *really* want to hear the truth?
- Is it possible to “love” someone with a lie? Is it possible to speak the truth without love? What must be the essential balance?

WLC Q/A #18-20

Q18: What are God's works of providence?

A18: God's works of providence are his most holy,[1] wise,[2] and powerful preserving [3] and governing [4] all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions,[5] to his own glory.[6]

1. **Psa. 145:17** - The LORD is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works.

2. **Psa. 104:24** - O LORD, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches. **Isa. 28:29** - This also cometh forth from the LORD of hosts, which is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working.

3. **Heb. 1:8** - But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.

4. **Psa. 103:19** - The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all.

5. **Matt. 10:29-31** - Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than

many sparrows. **Gen. 45:7** - And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

6. **Rom. 11:36** - For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen. **Isa. 43:14** - Thus saith the LORD, your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; For your sake I have sent to Babylon, and have brought down all their nobles, and the Chaldeans, whose cry is in the ships.

Q19: What is God's providence towards the angels?

A19: God by his providence permitted some of the angels, wilfully and irrecoverably, to fall into sin and damnation,[1] limiting and ordering that, and all their sins, to his own glory;[2] and established the rest in holiness and happiness;[3] employing them all,[4] at his pleasure, in the administrations of his power, mercy, and justice.[5]

1. **Jude 1:6** - And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. **2 Peter 2:4** - For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment. **Heb. 2:16** - For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. **John 8:44** - Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.

2. **Job 1:12** - And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD. **Matt. 8:31** - So the devils besought him, saying, If thou cast us out, suffer us to go away into the herd of swine.

3. **1 Tim. 5:21** - I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality. **Mark 8:38** - Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. **Heb. 12:22** - But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels.

4. **Psa. 104:4** - Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire.

5. **2 Kings 19:35** - And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the LORD went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. **Heb. 1:14** - Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

Q20: What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created?

A20: The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth;[1] putting the creatures under his dominion,[2] and ordaining marriage for his help;[3] affording him communion with himself;[4] instituting the sabbath;[5] entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience,[6] of which the tree of life was a pledge;[7] and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.[8]

1. **Gen. 2:8** - And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. **Gen. 2:15-16** - And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat.

2. **Gen. 1:28** - And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

3. **Gen. 2:18** - And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.

4. **Gen. 1:26-29** - And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. **Gen. 3:8** - And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.

5. **Gen. 2:3** - And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.

6. **Gal. 3:12** - And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them. **Rom. 10:5** - For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them.

7. **Gen. 2:9** - And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

8. **Gen. 2:17** - But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

WCF 5.6-5.7

6. As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden,^a from them he not only withholdeth his grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings and wrought upon in their hearts,^b but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had,^c and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin;^d and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan;^e whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.^f

a. **Rom 1:24, 26, 28** - Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. . . . For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature. . . . And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. **Rom 11:7-8** - What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day."

b. **Deut 29:4** - But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.

c. **Mat 13:12** - For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. **Matt 25:29** - For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

d. **Deut 2:30** - But Sihon the king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him, for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might give him into your hand, as he is this day. **2 Kings 8:12-13** - And Hazael said, "Why does my lord weep?" He answered, "Because I know the evil that you will do to the people

of Israel. You will set on fire their fortresses, and you will kill their young men with the sword and dash in pieces their little ones and rip open their pregnant women.” And Hazeal said, “What is your servant, who is but a dog, that he should do this great thing?” Elisha answered, “The LORD has shown me that you are to be king over Syria.”

e. **Psa 81:11-12** - “But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.” **2 Thes 2:10-12** - And with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

f. **Exod 7:3** - But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt. **Exod 8:15** - But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the LORD had said. **Exod 8:32** - But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go. **Isa 6:9-10** - And he said, “Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” **Acts 28:26-27** - “Go to this people, and say, “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.” **Isa 8:14** - And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. **2 Cor 2:15-16** - For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? **1 Pet 2:7-8** - So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

- Here we find another hard doctrine regarding sin and evil—that God “hardens” men’s hearts. How do we understand the meaning of this expression? How else can it be stated? (see the verses from Romans 1 above)
- Paradoxical? Who “hardened” Pharaoh’s heart? (compare Ex 7:3 with 8:15 above)
- How does “hardness of heart” expose a serious moral defect? (Hint: how are we resisting God’s *word* and God’s *will*?)
- See James 4:4. What does the love of the world produce?
- See Romans 8:7. What does this tell us about man’s fallenness?
- The Bible teaches us that there is one stone which produces two results (see Is 8:11-15, 1 Pet 2:4-8, and Matt 21:42-44).
- How can one “stone” be two different things at the same time? Or how can the Christian be a fragrance of both *life* and *death* (2 Cor 2:16)?
- See Luke 2:22-38: a child is appointed *for the rise and fall of many*.
- See Luke 2:14: to whom is the annunciation “good news”?
- See Matt 10:34-38: not peace but a sword (see also Micah 7:1-7).

- Consider Isaiah’s dismal charge after he answered God’s call as a prophet. (see Is 6:8-13)
- The promise of God is that his word *always* accomplishes what *he* intends for it—which implies that it doesn’t necessarily accomplish what *we* might intend for it.
- Isaiah 55:10-11 - “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”
- How does this passage from Isaiah 55 come to bear on the preaching of the gospel? How do we explain why some receive the gospel with gratitude and others reject it with hostility?
- Consider the parable of the soils (Matt 13:1-23)—the same seeds are scattered indiscriminately everywhere (which a wise farmer would never do); in only one case does the seed produce fruit; in almost every other case the seed sprouts and begins to grow; one kind of seed never has the chance to sprout before it is snatched away.
- The restraint of sin in the unconverted is what we call “common grace”—God keeping the sinner from being as bad as he *could* be.
- Removing the restraints of common grace toward the unbeliever means hardship for those around him; *judgment* for the sinner becomes *chastisement* for the Christian.

7. 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.^a

a. **Isa 43:3-5, 14** - 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. Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. . . . Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: “For your sake I send to Babylon and bring them all down as fugitives, even the Chaldeans, in the ships in which they rejoice.” **Amos 9:8-9** – “Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,” declares the LORD. “For behold, I will command, and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve, but no pebble shall fall to the earth.” **Rom 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. **1 Tim 4:10** - For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

- Look at Romans 8 as a passage referring to the *church*: “those who are called”—*kletois*—which is the same root of the word translated “church”—*ekklesia* (the *called out* ones)
- In what specific ways does Christ care for his church?
 - in her *founding* (Matt 16:18—“I will build my church”)
 - in her *feeding* (2 Tim 3:16—all scripture is breathed out by God and profitable . . .)
 - in her *protection* (Matt 16:18—“the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”)
 - in her *persecution* (John 15:20—“a servant is not greater than his master”)
 - in her *sanctification* (Eph 5:26-27—washing her with the water of the word)

- in her *multiplication* (John 6:37—“all that the Father gives to me will come to me”)
 - in her *gifting* (1 Cor 12:7—to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good)
- Paul’s conclusion in Romans 8? In spite of all kinds of trials and persecutions—even death!—we are “super victorious” (*hypernikomen*).

“The providential government of God over mankind in general is subordinate as a means to an end to his gracious providence toward his Church, whereby he gathers it out of every people and nation, and makes all things work together for good to those who are called according to his purpose.”¹

Concluding Thoughts

- The big takeaways from this chapter are that: (1) God orchestrates **all** the details of our lives, and (2) brings **all** things together for our good, and (3) works **all** things to his eternal purpose which (4) brings **all** glory to him.
- It never hurts to be reminded that God is at the center of his creation.
- The question for each of us—do we *really* believe in the providence of God as it is revealed in the Bible? And if so, are we living in the reality that all things of every kind are, at every moment, serving his ultimate purposes?
- In other words, are we living as pagans—seeing little connection with details in our lives, and depending vaguely on luck or chance or karma—or are we living as Christians in the absolute certainty that God works **all** things to *his* purposes?
- How would the course of our lives be changed if we lived in the knowledge of God’s providence?
 - no chance, no coincidence, no luck, no karma, no accidents?
 - no plans of man that come to pass unless they are already part of God’s plan?
 - no plans that succeed without his approval?
 - no plans that can ever undermine his design?

Upcoming Lessons

- January 8: Chapter 6, Paragraphs 1 & 2
- January 15: Chapter 6, Paragraphs 3 & 4
- January 22: Chapter 6, Paragraphs 5 & 6
- January 29: Chapter 7, Paragraphs 1 & 2

¹ Hodge, p. 101.

Suggested Resources (new items added to the top of the list / older items removed)

Resources you may find helpful for this study:

- *Report of the Creation Study Committee*, 27th General Assembly, 1999. ([here](#))
- *The Lie: Evolution*, Ken Ham, 1987.
- *Genesis and the Decay of the Nations*, Ken Ham, 1996.
- *The New Answers Book 2*, Ken Ham ed., 2008.
- “In the Beginning . . .”, R. C. Sproul, September 18, 2020. ([here](#))
- “Is Genesis History?”, Del Tackett, 2020. (full movie [here](#))
- YouTube Channel: Is Genesis History? ([here](#))
- Answers in Genesis ([here](#))
- The Institute for Creation Research ([here](#))
- *The Confession of Faith*, A. A. Hodge, 1869.
- *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, G. I. Williamson, 1964.

All scripture quotations are ESV unless otherwise noted.

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