

**The Unconverted “Believer” (22)  
The Mystery of God’s Providence**

Let us begin with the reading an exclamation of the Apostle Paul upon his consideration of the manner in which God was working through history to bring about His sovereign purposes. Here is Romans 11:33-36.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

For who has known the mind of the LORD?  
Or who has become His counselor?”  
Or who has first given to Him  
And it shall be repaid to him?”

For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

This was Paul’s reaction and response to his understanding and recounting of who God is and what He was doing in history in order to save from sin His people throughout the world. Paul rejoiced and praised God that He was in control of history. Paul gave forth this expression of great devotion to the glory of God for who He is, for all that He has done, and for all that He will yet do in history. Paul’s declaration of the glory of God is an exuberant expression of praise, reflecting his own amazement upon his contemplation of the wisdom and majesty of God, that God would so order history in the manner that He has decreed from eternity and that He had the power to bring it to realization. He would affirm as true the statement of the psalmist:

The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
The plans of His heart to all generations. (Psa. 34:11)

Paul expressed himself with great emotion. He was taken up with an overwhelming sense of wonder that God could devise the course of history and then to carry out every detail of history to the accomplishing of His purpose. Paul confessed and celebrated God’s wisdom and sovereignty. He attempted to lift his readers to the same measure of adoration that he felt and expressed.

In describing God at work in His world Paul declared that God’s “ways are past finding out.” This speaks to the mystery of God’s providential dealings in His world that are beyond our ability to fully comprehend. God’s ways forward are certainly unknown to us, at least in detail, and when we stand and look back on what God has done, we may be rightly amazed at His wisdom as we are struck with an awareness of our own ignorance and inability to have anticipated or understood what God was doing. There is a mystery of God’s providence into which we are incapable of assessing and evaluating. God’s ways are past finding out. How does this impinge on our subject, “The Unconverted ‘Believer’”? The point that we wish to make is that it is not easy to assess rightly God’s attitude or assessment of a person based on what takes place in his or her life. God’s way with His people are full of twists and turns and we are unable to clearly and fully assess how He regards us by what we experience within the working of His providence.

Now throughout our consideration of this important subject, we have shown that it is a difficult matter to demonstrate and convince many who presume they are Christians that they may be yet unconverted, still in their sins. They have convinced themselves and many have reinforced for them that they are “saved.” But if and when the biblical record is considered and their profession and the experience of their claims are assessed, there may be reasons that they should question the validity of their profession. But more often than not, they remain confirmed in their delusions. And one of the reasons for their steadfastness in their false assurance is that they have drawn conclusions about their spiritual condition based on how they think God has been at work in their lives. They have convinced themselves that God must be for them because of what they have seen and

experienced. One may think, “Because God has so clearly blessed me, I am certain that I must be a true Christian.” On the other hand, there are those who may be true Christians, they believe they must be numbered among those nominal Christians, because they, too, have concluded from God’s dealings with them that they could not be in God’s favor, that they could not be true Christians. The problem is a failure to assess and evaluate rightly God’s work in the lives of the people of the world. All too often strangers to Christ wrongly believe that God is for them, even while true Christians believe wrongly that God is against them. The problem with both groups is that they are drawing wrong conclusions regarding God’s dealings with them.

When we speak of God’s work through history we are referring to the matter of His providence. Providence speaks of God working and accomplishing His purposes in history. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) addressed the matter this way:

Question 11. What are God’s works of providence?

Answer. God’s works of providence are, His most holy, wise, and powerful reserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions.

Another reformed catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), is more detailed in its definition.

Question 27: What do you understand by the providence of God?

Answer: The almighty, everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were, by His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

Our Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 contains 33 articles of the Christian faith. It devotes one entire article to this matter of God’s providence. Article 5 contains seven distinct statements respecting this doctrine. Here is the first paragraph that defines and describes God’s providence:

God the good Creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, to the end for the which they were created, according unto His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will; to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.<sup>1</sup>

The other six statements of this article further explain and correct wrong conclusions that some may draw from this biblical truth. There is a paragraph that states that although God controls the evil that is perpetuated by evil people, God is not the chargeable author of their sin. They alone are responsible for sin, although God accomplishes His purposes through them. Here is paragraph 4 of the article on God’s providence:

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in His providence, that His determinate counsel extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sinful actions both of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, which also He most wisely and powerfully boundeth, and otherwise ordereth and governeth, in a manifold dispensation to His most holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness of their acts proceedeth only from the creatures, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.

The Holy Scriptures—the Word of God—declares the sovereignty of God in His providential dealings in history. In Isaiah 46 God declared that He purposed to save His people from bondage in that He would raise up

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<sup>1</sup> The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, Article 5, paragraph 1. The entire article on providence is included at the end of these notes.

a deliverer, even a pagan king--King Cyrus of Persia, whom He would send to defeat Babylon thereby securing the release of His exiled people. Here is Isaiah 46:9-11.

Remember the former things of old,  
For I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God, and there is none like Me,  
<sup>10</sup>Declaring the end from the beginning,  
And from ancient times things that are not yet done,  
Saying, '*My counsel shall stand,  
And I will do all My pleasure,*'  
<sup>11</sup>Calling a bird of prey from the east,  
The man who executes My counsel, from a far country.  
*Indeed I have spoken it;  
I will also bring it to pass.  
I have purposed it;  
I will also do it.*

From God's perspective there are no "accidents" in the history of the world which He governs and controls. But a problem exists when we attempt to understand God's specific works of providence. With respect to assessing precisely or many times even generally what God is doing and why He is doing it, we are at a loss. Apart from the Scriptures we are incapable (of knowing the mind of God and just why and how He will accomplish His purposes as we observe the unfolding of events about us. This is why it is unwise and possibly very misleading to attempt to assess the reality or the quality of one's relationship with God through Christ by analyzing what is happening in your life. The Holy Scriptures alone are to be our canon, or rule, by which all matters of one's relationship with God in Christ are to be assessed and measured.

Let us consider this matter of God's providence more carefully by first recognizing...

## **I. The difficulty to assess and interpret God's acts of providence**

The Word of God demonstrates our inability to know the ways of God. The entire story of Job demonstrates this truth. Job and his "friends" show us how wrong well-intentioned people can be about what God is doing and why He is doing it. The three friends of Job, who came to "comfort" him in his affliction, assumed that the God's dealings with people revealed either His favor or disfavor toward them. They thought wrongly that they could assess the mind of God through what they saw before their eyes. They all assumed what is called "a retribution principle." Their assessment of God's ways was that in all cases at all times men reap in this life what they have sown. Sin will always result and be seen in God's (temporal) judgment and righteousness will always result and be seen in God' temporal blessing or protection, provision, and abundance. Here is a footnote in The Reformation Study Bible that described the understanding of Job's friends:

They speak in turn, probably in order of seniority, and Job responds to each contribution. All the speakers accept a simplistic "retribution principle," whereby God controls the world by punishing anyone who sins and rewards whoever does what is right. Job's friends, however, hold that the reverse is true: whoever suffers has sinned and whoever is blessed is righteous. As such, there is a one-to-one correspondence between sin and suffering; since Job is suffering so greatly, he has sinned greatly. At first they just hint at this (5:8; 8:6; 11:14), but when Job fails to accept their analysis, they become more open and ferocious in their attacks. Though ultimately it is true that God punishes (impenitent) sinners and rewards (those he mercifully declares to be) righteous people, Job's friends err in believing that every instance of suffering is an application of this principle.<sup>2</sup>

Toward the end of the story after God had revealed Himself to Job, God spoke of Job's friends:

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<sup>2</sup> R. C. Sproul, gen. ed., **The Reformation Study Bible** (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), p. 798.

And so it was, after the LORD had spoken these words to Job, that the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has. <sup>8</sup>Now therefore, take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams, go to My servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and My servant Job shall pray for you. For I will accept him, lest I deal with you according to your folly; because you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has.” (Job 42:7, 8)

We should be careful, even cautious in our claims and assertions because interpreting God’s works of providence is a very difficult matter in which it is quite easy to draw wrong conclusions about God’s role and involvement in what is played out before us. In fact because of our limited ability, we should often not make claims or specific assertions as to what God is doing when we observe what takes place before us. God Himself declared our inability to assess these “secret” dealings of God. Moses taught the people of Israel “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29).

But it is common for people to promote and maintain exclusively this “retribution principle” in assessing how God regards and treats people. The so-called “health and wealth gospel” promoters do so to a great degree to their fault. They teach that if God has favor toward you that He will most certainly cause you to be healthy and prosperous, that He will preserve you from adversity and difficulty. If you, therefore, fail to experience these “blessings” it reveals that you are out of God’s favor, that He must be punishing you for your sins or for your faulty or defective faith or walk with Him. They would have stood beside Job’s friends giving a hearty “amen” to their assessments and assertions.

The truth is that the ways of providence are mysterious to us. God does things at times when we do not expect it and in ways that we would have never have contemplated or predicted. This is why the Scriptures speak of God’s providential dealings as “past finding out.” Job 9:10 reads, “He does great things past finding out, yes, wonders without number.” And as we first read in Romans 11:33, “How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!”

This difficulty in assessing God’s purposes and actions may be illustrated in our efforts to understand what God is doing at this time in history in the life of our nation and this world. When we consider the direction in which our world is moving, the unrelenting virus and all of the various ways that people and their governments are prescribing, even demanding, and then when we consider the degradation of Christian thinking and changing morality, Christians are all over the map in how they think we should react and respond. Again, the difficulty lies in our interpreting what we see and experience and then attempt to draw conclusions as to what God is doing, why He is doing it, and what we, therefore, should do. We are generally not like the sons of Issachar, “who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (1 Chron. 12:32). We should be careful, even cautious in our claims and assertions knowing that interpreting God’s works of providence is a very difficult matter in which it is quite easy to draw wrong conclusions about God’s role and involvement in what is played out before us.

We should understand, however, that when the Scriptures tell us that these “great things” of God’s dealings are “past finding out”, God is speaking of our inability to know what it is God is presently doing and in what ways He may work in the future. We can, with care and caution, make some determinations of what God has been doing in the past. After all, within the context of our passage of Romans 11 Paul revealed what he had learned in a measure of what God had been formerly doing (and in a measure presently doing) in blinding the Jews and opening the eyes of the Gentiles to the gospel. Indeed, God’s ways had been past finding out, but as God accomplished His purposes, He had revealed to Paul what it was He was doing. God does all things in order to manifest His glory. And when we see God’s acts of providence played out before us in history, we should recognize and acknowledge His glorious working. Paul had come to know in a measure “the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” His understanding was of such clarity and certainty that it resulted in him expressing his wonder and praise to God for doing what He was doing! And so, while careful not to make invalid assessments and draw wrong conclusions, we may know with certainty the purpose of God in His specific works of providence. By the grace of God we can acquire in a measure understanding of His unsearchable ways that He has worked in His world.

## **II. The possibility in a measure to assess and interpret God’s acts of providence**

There is available a classic puritan book entitled *The Mystery of Providence* that was written by **John Flavel** (1627-1691).<sup>3</sup> Why did Flavel include the descriptive word, “Mystery” in his title regarding God’s providence? Perhaps he did so for two reasons. First, in depicting God’s providence as “mystery” he was able to set forth the surpassing wisdom of God in His dealings, wisdom that we may find impossible to fully or truly understand while events unfold before us. And second, even for Christians using their Bibles it may be with difficulty to discern and assess God’s purposes even after the events occur. The nature and purpose of Flavel’s book, *The Mystery of Providence*, was to explain the nature of God’s dealings in the world and more specifically, among His people. He sought to instruct Christians on how to understand God’s will through observing and meditating on His works of providence. Here are a few words in the publisher’s introduction in the Banner of Truth edition of Flavel’s book published in 1963:

When John Flavel writes of the providence of God, he does not simply deliver a lecture. He writes in a thrilling way out of a full heart. He knows from church history and from his own experience of the works of God on behalf of His people. Above all, he knows the Word of God intimately and he knows how to apply it. He shows how the hand of God may be discerned in our personal affairs, avoiding the extravagances of mysticism as well as the skepticism of unbelief. His treatise is calculated to abase man and exalt God, and yet to kindle faith and adoration in the heart of every child of God.

To learn of the providence of God under the tuition of John Flavel will bring Christian believers into a sphere they never reckoned with before. It will also, we are confident, shed light on the great concerns of present day evangelicals. How may we live a consecrated and victorious life? Let us first realize that everything does not depend on us. Let us see what God has done and is doing for our spiritual good. Then we may seek to work out what He is working in us. And what of guidance? Let us learn that, in an ultimate sense, we can never be “outside the will of God.” Flavel would teach us that God’s will for us is our duty to be found in His Word. Moreover we should have a right attitude to all circumstances, even the most adverse. Finally, our Christian witness will not be crippled, as many fear, but quickened by a right apprehension of the sovereignty of God.<sup>4</sup>

Again, what Paul had expressed in Romans 11:33ff was that God’s wisdom in His works of providence were “unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” But the fact that Paul had come to understand *in a measure* what God was doing is clear, for this is what resulted in Him praising God for His surpassing wisdom and power. Paul saw the glory of God in what God was doing through history and he then praised God because of it. We cannot know precisely why God may be doing what He is doing, but in time as we look back upon His dealings we may come to see His wisdom and power in having brought us through what we are experiencing.

### **III. God reveals Himself and His ways in history.**

God reveals Himself as all-wise through *His actions in history*. Psalm 104:24 reads, “O LORD, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all.” How is the wisdom of God displayed through His actions?

#### **A. First, the wisdom of God is known in *His work of creation*.**

Only an all-wise God could have produced the world in which we live. There is an order, an interdependence, and an interrelation between all things that shows an infinitely wise God is ordering the existence of all things. The existence of all things betrays an all-wise designer. Consider the testimony of **Albert Einstein**, who was no Christian, nevertheless, who understood and concluded that the universe betrays a Designer who is still controlling the universe. He said,

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<sup>3</sup> John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1963, orig. 1678), 221 pp. If you receive our weekly sermon notes via email, I attached a PDF file of this complete book of 222 pages.

<sup>4</sup> John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1963, orig. 1678), pp. 13f.

We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many different languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It does not know how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books but doesn't know what it is. That it seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent being toward God. We see a universe marvelously arranged and obeying certain laws, but only dimly understand those laws. Our limited minds cannot grasp the mysterious force that moves the constellations.<sup>5</sup>

This statement was not a faith statement; it was a conclusion that Einstein made from his own observation and assessment of the universe. Now one could logically argue whether his conclusion was correct in the light of the evidence that he observed, but one cannot dismiss his statement as merely dictated by faith generated from his religion. It was his reasonable conclusion from the scientific observation of the universe. There is a complexity and an order, and an orderly functioning of all that exists, that betrays an all-wise God who created all things.

**B. A second work of God in which His unsearchable wisdom is displayed in His work of *bringing redemption to His people*.**

**Thomas Watson** (1620-1686) wrote of this:

Here was the masterpiece of divine wisdom, to contrive a way to happiness between the sin of man and the justice of God. We may cry out with the apostle, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God" (Rom. 11:33). This astonished men and angels. If God had put us to find out a way of salvation when we were lost, we could neither have had a head to devise, nor a heart to desire, what God's infinite wisdom had found out for us. Mercy had a mind to save sinners, and was loath that the justice of God should be wronged. It is a pity, says Mercy, that such a noble creature as man should be made to be undone; and yet God's justice must not be a loser. What way then shall be found out? Angels cannot satisfy for the wrong done to God's justice, nor is it fit that one nature should sin, and another nature suffer. What then? Shall man be forever lost? Now, while Mercy was thus debating with itself, what to do for the recovery of fallen man, the Wisdom of God stepped in; and thus the oracle spake: - Let God become man; let the Second Person in the Trinity be incarnate, and suffer; and so for fitness He shall be man, and for ability he shall be God; thus justice may be satisfied, and man saved. O the depth of the riches of the wisdom of God, thus to make justice and mercy to kiss each other! Great is this mystery, 'God manifest in the flesh' (1 Tim. 3:16). What wisdom was this, that Christ should be made sin, yet know no sin; that God should condemn the sin, yet save the sinner! Here was wisdom, to find out the way of salvation.

God's work of salvation reveals His unsearchable wisdom in the way that He chose people to be saved from their sin through *faith*. Faith as a way of salvation leaves the saved sinner humble and shows forth the Savior as glorious. Faith enables all glory to be given to Jesus Christ and none to be assumed by the Christian.

The manner in which God produces faith in us betrays God's wisdom. Faith is produced by His grace through "hearing" and that hearing is of the "Word of God preached." This is foolishness in the mind of the world, but it is incredible wisdom on the part of God. He saves us in a manner that "no flesh may glory in His presence" (1 Cor. 1:29). Paul wrote of the spiritual life that was in him, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7). Here God's wisdom is seen in that no flesh may glory in His presence in the manner of His application of salvation to His people.

**C. Third, as we have already asserted, the wisdom of God is displayed through *God's works of providence in history*.**

God not only created the world, God governs His world. And God's governance reveals His wisdom. In our text of Romans 11 Paul described God's dealings with Israel and the Gentiles that was so clever as to bring

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<sup>5</sup> John F. Ashton, ed., **In Six Days; Why Fifty Scientists Choose to Believe in Creation** (Master Books, 2001), p.156.

about God's purposes in a way that a man could never have devised. But more specifically, how is God's wisdom seen in His work of providence, or His governance of all things that transpire in His world?

**1. God's wisdom is displayed in His bringing to pass great events by using what appears to be insignificant or inadequate means.**

In Numbers 21 we read of an incident when Israel murmured against God and Moses, complaining about God's dealings with them. We may read there:

<sup>5</sup>And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread." <sup>6</sup>So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

<sup>7</sup>Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

<sup>8</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." <sup>9</sup>So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived. (Numb. 21:5-9)

We see how God healed the people who had been bitten by poisonous snakes, using a bronze snake on a pole. This means had no direct contact with any of the persons bitten. It did not require them to do anything, promise anything, achieve anything. They were told that all they were to do was to look, believing in God's provision, and they would be saved from death and would be healed. Here the wisdom of God is seen in that it was a means that brought no glory to anyone but God. Those who were dying did nothing meritorious or effectual to bring about their cure. They were to look in faith, and in faith they were healed. God in His wisdom brought about their deliverance so that He alone would be looked to and credited with their deliverance.

But of course we also see the wisdom of God in this rather simple solution to their grievous condition, in that God through it displayed the glorious salvation that comes through His Son Jesus Christ, through whose crucifixion would bring about the forgiveness of sins. And so John's Gospel could record,

"No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. <sup>14</sup>And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:13-16)

And so, in this simple means, the glorious end or outcome reveals the wisdom of God.

Similarly, we could look at the manner in which God brought the healing of **Naaman the Syrian** of his leprosy. We read of this in 2 Kings 5.

<sup>1</sup>Now Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great and honorable man in the eyes of his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was also a mighty man of valor, but a leper. <sup>2</sup>And the Syrians had gone out on raids, and had brought back captive a young girl from the land of Israel. She waited on Naaman's wife. <sup>3</sup>Then she said to her mistress, "If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! For he would heal him of his leprosy." <sup>4</sup>And Naaman went in and told his master, saying, "Thus and thus said the girl who is from the land of Israel."

<sup>5</sup>Then the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel."

So he departed and took with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. <sup>6</sup>Then he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which said,

Now be advised, when this letter comes to you, that I have sent Naaman my servant to you, that you may heal him of his leprosy.

<sup>7</sup>And it happened, when the king of Israel read the letter, that he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to kill and make alive, that this man sends a man to me to heal him of his leprosy? Therefore please consider, and see how he seeks a quarrel with me.”

<sup>8</sup>So it was, when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, that he sent to the king, saying, “Why have you torn your clothes? Please let him come to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel.”

<sup>9</sup>Then Naaman went with his horses and chariot, and he stood at the door of Elisha’s house. <sup>10</sup>And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean.” <sup>11</sup>But Naaman became furious, and went away and said, “Indeed, I said to myself, ‘He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy.’ <sup>12</sup>Are not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” So he turned and went away in a rage. <sup>13</sup>And his servants came near and spoke to him, and said, “My father, if the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, ‘Wash, and be clean?’” <sup>14</sup>So he went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. (2 Kings 5:1-14)

Now consider the wisdom of God in using this seeming simple means of washing in the Jordan to bring about Naaman’s cure. First, we see the wisdom of God in His providence of having a young Jewish girl as a slave in Naaman’s household. We do not know how or why she was there, but clearly God had placed her there in His providence. And then we see how the subject arose in the conversation of the slave girl and Naaman’s wife. No doubt the Lord moved the young Jewish girl to have first learned, then later remembered the ability of Elisha to work miracles. The wife of Naaman believed the girl. Naaman believed his wife. And then we have the seeming absurd way of cleansing, which was washing in the Jordan. The entire event resulted in this pagan foreign army officer to be converted and resolve to serve the true God the remaining days of his life.

God delights in bringing about His purposes through small and insignificant things and people. It was David, the youngest son of a family from an insignificant town, a shepherd boy, that God chose to lead His people Israel. God would choose His Son to be born into the world to a poor family living in an obscure corner of Galilee who would one day be the Lord and Savior of mankind. God’s wisdom is seen in the intricacies of his providence in a multitude of ways through Scripture. The wisdom of God is evident.

## **(2) The wisdom of God is seen in doing God doing His work *through ironic circumstances*.**

How would God fulfill young Joseph’s vision of his parents and his brothers bowing down before him? God would send Joseph to Egypt, first as a slave, and then to become a prisoner, and then to become prime minister.

By his imprisonment God made way for his advancement. For God to save in an ordinary way would not so much display His wisdom. But when He goes strangely to work, and saves in that very way in which we think He will destroy, His wisdom shines forth in a most conspicuous manner.<sup>6</sup>

When God purposed to deliver His people from their oppression from under the Midianites, He would use few means so that He would alone receive the glory. How God did it and that God could do it displays His wisdom. The call was made by Gideon, 32,000 men showed up. But that was too many. A cut was made, 22,000 who were fearful were sent away. But that was too many. Take them down to the river side, and select the ones that drank water in a certain manner. Only 300 remained. But with them God made a way to cause a panic among Israel’s enemies and a great victory resulted.

When the time came for God to deliver His people from Egypt from under Pharaoh, how did God do His work. He did not cause His people to come into favor of the Egyptians; rather, we read that God turned the

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Watson, **All Things for Good** (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986; orig. 1663), p. 74.



Egyptians “to hate His people” (Psa. 105:25). “The more they hated and oppressed Israel, the more God plagued the Egyptians, and the more glad they were to let Israel go (Exod. 12:33).

When God would save his runaway prophet and set him back on his mission, God first a great storm to arise at sea and then God caused a great fish to swallow Jonah and deliver him toward Nineveh, God’s destination for him.

When God would have Paul sent to bear witness to Rome of the Gospel, God caused Paul to be arrested. He led Paul to appeal to Caesar, and therefore, to Caesar Paul was sent.

**(3) The wisdom of God is seen in making *the greatest of evils to turn about for the good of His people.*** Joseph’s brothers meant their treatment of Joseph to be cruel as they were moved by evil. But God intended to turn that event out for the salvation of his family. And the devil, the Jewish leaders, and the Roman leaders, all complicit in crucifying Jesus, unwittingly, were the very instruments God used to bring about the salvation of all of God’s people. As one once said, God “makes His people gainers by losses, and turns their crosses into blessings.”

**(4) The wisdom of God is seen in this, that *the sins of men shall carry on God’s work; yet He should have no hand in their sin.***

As Thomas Watson expressed:

The Lord permits sin, but does not approve it. He has a hand in the action in which sin is, but not in the sin of the action. As in the crucifying of Christ, so far as it was a natural action, God concurred; if He had not given the Jews life and breath, they could not have done it; but as it was a sinful action, so God abhorred it. A musician plays upon a violin out of tune; the musician is the cause of the sound, but the jarring and discord is from the violin itself; so men’s natural motion is from God, but their sinful motion is from themselves. When a man rides on a lame horse, his riding is the cause why the horse goes, but the lameness is from the horse itself. Herein is God’s wisdom, that the sins of men carry on His work, yet he has no hand in them.<sup>7</sup>

**(5) The wisdom of God is seen when God *delivers people from helpless and hopeless conditions.*** When man’s arm fails, when man’s wits fail, when man exhausts every option, but then he humbles himself, God intervenes and brings deliverance. The wisdom of God is displayed how He works deliverances and victories.

**(6) God’s wisdom is seen in *befooling wise men, and in making their wisdom the means of their overthrow.*** “God taketh the wise in their own craftiness” (Job 5:13); that is, when they think they are wise and will succeed by deceit and trickery, God uncovers them and exposes them for the corrupt men they are. God hung Haman on his own gallows he prepared to hang Mordecai.

Now if God is in control of history, choosing among Jews and among Gentiles whom He will save through Jesus Christ, if God’s wisdom and knowledge encompass all that has taken place on the grand stage of the history of nations, what does that say of His knowledge of you? If we contemplated this somewhat we would find ourselves as the psalmist. Of God he said:

<sup>2</sup>You know my sitting down and my rising up;  
You understand my thought afar off.

<sup>3</sup>You comprehend my path and my lying down,  
And are acquainted with all my ways.

<sup>4</sup>For there is not a word on my tongue, But behold, O LORD, You know it altogether.

<sup>5</sup>You have hedged me behind and before,  
And laid Your hand upon me.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
It is high,  
I cannot attain it. (Psa. 139:2-6)

This is how the apostle felt when contemplating the sovereign purposes of God that were unfolding in history.

The apostle concluded his doxology with these words: ***“For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen.”*** This is an expression of God being the source of all things (“from Him”) (sin and evil excepted), the cause of all things (“through Him”), as well as the primary purpose for all things (“for Him”). It describes God’s sovereignty over all things. Here are Matthew Henry’s comments of Paul’s words:

He resolves all into the sovereignty of God (v. 36): For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things, that is, God is all in all. All things in heaven and earth (especially those things which relate to our salvation, the things which belong to our peace) are of Him by way of creation, through Him by way of providential influence, that they may be to Him in their final tendency and result. Of God as the spring and fountain of all, through Christ, God-man, as the conveyance, to God as the ultimate end. These three include, in general, all God’s causal relations to His creatures: of Him as the first efficient cause, through Him as the supreme directing cause, to Him as the ultimate final cause; for the Lord hath made all for Himself, Rev. iv. 11. If all be of Him and through Him, there is all the reason in the world that all should be to Him and for Him. It is a necessary circulation; if the rivers received their waters from the sea, they return them to the sea again, Eccl. i. 7. To do all to the glory of God is to make a virtue of necessity; for all shall in the end be to Him, whether we will or no. And so he concludes with a short doxology: To whom be glory forever, Amen. God’s universal agency as the first cause, the sovereign ruler, and the last end, ought to be the matter of our adoration. Thus all His works do praise Him objectively; but His saints do bless Him actively; they hand that praise to Him which all the creatures do minister matter for, Ps. cxlv. 10. Paul had been discoursing at large of the counsels of God concerning man, sifting the point with a great deal of accuracy; but, after all, he concludes with the acknowledgment of the divine sovereignty, as that into which all these things must be ultimately resolved, and in which alone the mind can safely and sweetly rest. This is, if not the scholastic way, yet the Christian way, of disputation. Whatever are the premises, let God’s glory be the conclusion; especially when we come to talk of the divine counsels and actings, it is best for us to turn our arguments into awful and serious adorations. The glorified saints, that see furthest into these mysteries, never dispute, but praise to eternity.

The ways of God among people vary greatly in nature. With regard to His servant, James the apostle, we read of God allowing King Herod to slay him. Acts 12:1 and 2 read, “Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” But when Herod would then kill Peter, God prevented him from fulfilling his intention. We read of Herod after the death of James:

“And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.” (Acts 12:3f)

The Lord enabled Peter to escape his prison cell through the miraculous intervention of an angel. Was Peter more holy than James? Was there some failure of James that had resulted in his death? No. It was in the purpose of God to have James die, but have Peter spared.

We read in Hebrews 11 of some people of faith through whom God wrought great works in history.

And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: <sup>33</sup>who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched the violence of fire, escaped the

edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. <sup>35</sup>Women received their dead raised to life again. (Heb. 11:32-35)

But we read of others who but persevered through great hardship and suffering.

Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented— <sup>38</sup>of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. (Heb. 11:35-38)

And so, on the one hand we are not to draw the conclusion, “God must be for me, I must be a Christian, for I experience and enjoy His providential blessing and have generally escaped adversity.” This is what those in the church at Laodicea had thought, but the Lord Jesus said to them these words: “Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked— (Rev. 3:17). But neither are we to conclude, “God must not be for me; I must not be a Christian, for I meet with nothing but adversity and difficulty.” Jesus said of those in the church at Smyrna, “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.” But to them Jesus promised, “He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” No, we are not to look at what kind of providential dealings that we may be experiencing and draw some conclusion respecting how God regards us. We are to believe the promises of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And Lord willing the Lord will produce fruit in our lives that substantiates our profession of faith. We are saved by God’s grace *through faith*. And that faith is in what God has declared that He has done and will do for those who believe and submit unto the Lord Jesus Christ.

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## **1689 Baptist Confession of Faith**

### **Chapter 5: Of Divine Providence**

1. God the good Creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, to the end for the which they were created, according unto His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will; to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy. (Heb. 1:3; Job 38:11; Isa. 46:10f; Psa. 135:6; Matt. 10:29-31; Eph. 1:11)
2. Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; so that there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without His providence; yet by the same providence He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently. (Acts 2:23; Prov. 16:33; Gen. 8:22)
3. God, in His ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at His pleasure. (Acts 27:31, 44; Isa. 55:10f; Hos. 1:7; Rom. 4:19-21; Dan. 3:27)
4. The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in His providence, that His determinate counsel extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sinful actions both of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, which also He most wisely and powerfully boundeth, and otherwise ordereth and governeth, in a manifold dispensation to His most holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness of their acts proceedeth only from the creatures, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin. (Rom. 11:32-34; 2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Chron. 21:1; 2 Kings 19:28; Psa. 76:10; Gen. 1:20; Isa. 10:6, 7, 12; Psa. 1:21; 1 John 2:16)

5. The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave for a season His own children to manifold temptations and the corruptions 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 other just and holy ends. So that whatsoever befalls any of His elect is by His appointment, for His glory, and their good. (2 Chron. 32:25f; 31; 2 Cor. 12:7-9; Rom. 8:28)

6. As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as the righteous judge, for former sin doth blind and harden; from them He not only withholdeth His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understanding, and wrought upon 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, under those means which God useth for the softening of others. (Rom. 1:24-26, 28; 11:7f; Deut. 29:4; Matt. 13:12; Duet. 2:30; 2 Kings 8:12f; Psa. 81:11f; 2 Thess. 2:10-12; Exod. 8:15, 32; Isa. 6:9f; 1 Pet. 2:7f)

7. As the providence of God doth in general reach to all creatures, so after a more special manner it taketh care of His church, and disposeth of all things to the good thereof. (1 Tim. 4:10; Amos 9:8f; Isa. 43:3-5)

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