

GOD'S PROVIDENCE, PART 2
(SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2015)

Scripture Reading: Ps. 121; Rom. 8:28-39

INTRODUCTION

When we study the Doctrine of God's Decree and Providence, we realize there is only so far we can go in exploring these doctrines.

There are clear limits because we are men and not God.

But is not the same thing true for many other precious doctrines?

We will always rejoice that the Son of God died for undeserving sinners, but can we really say, why God would give His only Son for us?

We can explore the truths of God's Word only as far as God reveals.

And yet to those who say, well, why bother to study these difficult subjects at all, we answer by saying, we want to know what God has revealed.

And it is not so that we can boast about having big heads!

No, just the opposite. We want humbled hearts.

And we don't want to be like Job's friends in giving poor comfort.

It is not in vain that we search and think about God's Word recognizing that we will not answer every question or satisfy all of our curiosity.

And as I mentioned last week, Scripture speaks a great deal about God's Providence.

We truly are only scratching the surface.

Last week – I shared three points:

- 1) God's Providence directs all things according to His foreknowledge and will for His praise and glory.
- 2) Nothing is by chance and yet God uses second causes to bring about His plan.
- 3) God ordinarily uses means, but He is not bound by anything in order to accomplish His purposes.

This week we give attention to three *challenging aspects* of God's Providence.

- 1) God's Providence extends to all things, yet God is not the author or approver of sin.

2) God often leaves His people in their sin for a season to humble them and for other just and holy ends.

3) God in His Providence deals with the wicked in a much different way than He deals with His people.

Know with complete certainty that God is at work for His glory and your good.

1) GOD'S PROVIDENCE EXTENDS TO ALL THINGS, YET GOD IS NOT THE AUTHOR OR APPROVER OF SIN.

This is a very challenging point and one we examined when we studied the doctrine of God's decree.

The Westminster Confession of Faith gives four points:

1. God's Providence extends to the Fall and the sins of men and angels.
2. God's Providence is not just permission.
3. God's Providence is the execution of a complete and comprehensive plan of God according to His holy ends.
4. Sinfulness proceeds from the creature and not from God. God is not the author or approver of sin.

Some would call this contradictory. How can God's plan extend even to sinful actions and yet God not be the author of sin?

Indeed this is a challenging area of study.

The above points I shared come not from human logic but from a study of God's Word.

If you find this challenging, it is not a surprise.

God's people have always wrestled with this doctrine.

The problem is when we let human thinking be the final word rather than humbly submit before God and His truth.

When Paul wrote about challenging matters related to God's sovereignty and the hardening of His own people in Romans 9-11, he ended these chapters with a great doxology.

Rom. 11:33 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! **34** *"For who has known the mind of the LORD?"*

Or who has become His counselor?"

35 *"Or who has first given to Him*

And it shall be repaid to him?"

Rom. 11:36 For of Him and through Him and to Him *are* all things, to whom *be* glory forever. Amen.

The points from the WCF that I shared above do not mean we can say "why" in terms of a particular reason why God does things.

The points above do establish that God does have a reason.

And in God's infinite wisdom, His Providence includes the most wicked, detestable deeds that men and women commit.

God's Providence includes suffering.

It includes babies dying and suffering with cancer.

It includes sorrow and joy.

God in His Providence brings horror, destruction, and incredible misery as well as peace, prosperity, and abundance.

And yet only in blasphemy do we try to blame God or curse Him for what He does.

Do you remember the advice of Job's wife?

Job 2:9 Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!"

Job responded saying:

Job 2:10 But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

I have already recommended before two important passages from the book of Acts dealing with the crucifixion of our Lord.

Acts 2:23 and Acts 4:27ff both speak of God's plan along with the most wicked actions of Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel.

The most wicked event ever in history was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Now if this all took place according to God's plan and Providence, then can we not understand how other sinful actions also fall under God's Providence without denying the responsibility of sinners?

The Biblical doctrine is both to maintain what God's Word says about man and God.

Yes, God's glory triumphs over the ideas and thoughts of men.

But when God's Word clearly presents human responsibility then we don't want to downplay this aspect of Scripture.

I want to share one other example under this point, the account of David who numbered the fighting forces of Israel sinfully.

Both 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles record this. Listen to the two passages that introduce this event.

2Sam. 24:1 Again the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel, and He moved David against them to say, "Go, number Israel and Judah."

1Chr. 21:1 Now Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel.

How do we understand this in light of what we have been studying?

Clearly it was in God's Providence that David sinfully chose to number the forces of Israel.

It was in particular Satan who tempted David to this sin.

David was not forced by God or Satan.

David freely chose to carry out this action.

We read in the account from 2 Samuel that even Joab realized that what David was doing was not right.

2Sam. 24:3 And Joab said to the king, "Now may the LORD your God add to the people a hundred times more than there are, and may the eyes of my lord the king see *it*. But why does my lord the king desire this thing?" **4** Nevertheless the king's word prevailed against Joab and against the captains of the army. Therefore Joab and the captains of the army went out from the presence of the king to count the people of Israel.

We read from verse 15 that 70,000 people in Israel died as a result of God's judgment.

David would later confess his sin and call upon God for mercy.

2Sam. 24:17 Then David spoke to the LORD when he saw the angel who was striking the people, and said, "Surely I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; but these sheep,

what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father's house."

And we know from this account that the place where God chose to show mercy became the place where Solomon would build His glorious temple.

In the vicinity of this same spot, the most awesome wrath of God would be poured out on the greater David, the Lord Jesus Christ, in order to make full atonement for sin.

In no way is the doctrine of God's Providence irrational or frightening if you are in Christ.

This doctrine is revealed to comfort and humble you so that you will always be able to say, **God is at work for His glory and my good.**

2) GOD OFTEN LEAVES HIS PEOPLE IN THEIR SIN FOR A SEASON TO HUMBLE THEM AND FOR OTHER JUST AND HOLY ENDS.

As I mentioned last week, the doctrine of sanctification is an aspect of God's Providence.

Any good that you do, is the work of God.

There is absolutely nothing that you or I can take credit for.

How easy it is to forget this or ignore this truth.

A second challenging aspect of God's Providence that we consider is that God in His plan does not deliver His redeemed, justified people from their sin entirely in this life.

And further, God as it were can leave His redeemed people in their sin for a season.

We only have to consider the great sin of David, Hezekiah, and others when we consider this point.

Listen to two examples under this point from Scripture.

The first example comes from the life of King Hezekiah.

2Chr. 32:25 But Hezekiah did not repay according to the favor *shown* him, for his heart was lifted up; therefore wrath was looming over him and over Judah and Jerusalem. **26** Then Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the LORD did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah.

2Chr. 32:31 However, *regarding* the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, whom they sent to him to inquire about the wonder that was *done* in the land, God withdrew from him, in order to test him, that He might know all *that was* in his heart.

We also consider the testimony of Peter. Listen to the words of our Lord from Luke 22:31-32 spoken to Peter who boasted of his determination to follow the Lord at all costs.

Luke 22:31 And the Lord said, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift *you* as wheat. **32** But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to *Me*, strengthen your brethren.”

G. I. Williamson in his commentary on the Confession has some good words on this point which I share.

If God controls everything, how can we account for the sins of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked?

There would no conflict in a believer if God had not created a new man in the first place (Eph. 2:20).

The new creature may seem very weak (Heb. 5:12-14).

But in no sense whatever, does the new man or his activities originate from the powers belonging to a man by nature. We can easily forget that in ourselves we are all sin!

God sometimes leaves us to our old ways to chastise us. We learn anew that we can do nothing of ourselves.

We are thus brought to seek salvation wholly in, and by the work of God.¹

Consider the great sin and shame of a number of Christian leaders recently.

Some we might say were always just charlatans from the beginning, but I don't think we can say that about all leaders or others we know who fall into serious, destructive sins.

A Christian can fall into serious sin and scandal such that shame is brought upon the name of Jesus Christ.

Increasingly you should be reminded that your trust can never be in man.

We certainly can benefit and be blessed by pastors, teachers, and other leaders.

But be ever so careful to never exalt men! It is a dangerous thing to do.

¹ GG. I. Williamson, 50-51.

Though we never can plumb the depths of our own sinful hearts, it is good that you seek to be honest before the Lord and before others.

Psa. 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties;

3) GOD IN HIS PROVIDENCE DEALS WITH THE WICKED IN A MUCH DIFFERENT WAY THAN HE DEALS WITH HIS PEOPLE.

The doctrine of God's Providence is truly only of comfort to God's people.

It should be a terrifying doctrine for the wicked.

For it is not chance or random events that control the universe and all things. Rather a holy, righteous God rules over all things without exception.

How does God's Providence extend to the wicked?

Scripture shows a number of related actions.

First, God blinds and hardens the wicked for former sins.

Rom. 1:24 Therefore **God also gave them up** to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves,

Rom. 1:26 For this reason **God gave them up** to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature.

Rom. 1:28 And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, **God gave them over** [same verb] to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting;

Rom. 11:7 What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. **8** Just as it is written:

“God has given them a spirit of stupor,

Eyes that they should not see

And ears that they should not hear,

To this very day.

2Th. 2:10 and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. **11** And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, **12** that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Second, God clearly withholds His saving grace that alone can change a sinner's heart.

Deut. 29:4 Yet the LORD has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this *very* day.

Third, God can withdraw gifts He has already given to the wicked.

Matt. 25:29 "For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.

Fourth, God can expose the wicked to situations where because of their sinfulness they turn into situations of sin and rebellion.

Deut. 2:30 "But Sihon king of Heshbon would not let us pass through, for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that He might deliver him into your hand, as *it is* this day.

Fifth, as a result the wicked harden themselves under the same means that God uses to soften His people.

Is. 8:14 He will be as a sanctuary,

But a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense

To both the houses of Israel,

As a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

2Cor. 2:15 For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. **16** To the one *we are* the aroma of death *leading* to death, and to the other the aroma of life *leading* to life. And who *is* sufficient for these things?

1Pet. 2:7 Therefore, to you who believe, *He is* precious; but to those who are disobedient,

"The stone which the builders rejected

Has become the chief cornerstone,"

8 and

"A stone of stumbling

And a rock of offense.” They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.

CONCLUSION

5.7. As the providence of God does, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it takes care of His Church, and disposes all things to the good thereof.

What kind of people should we be?

We don't live in a fully consistent way with God's truth. We are all inconsistent Christians.

We boast not in our own obedience but always in the grace of God.

However, may our thoughts, words, actions, and desires more and more be conformed to God's Word.

The doctrine of God's Providence so beautifully connects with the message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

We need a Savior!

We need a Savior not because God cannot control all things, but indeed because as a righteous judge He does control all things.

And so although we rejoice that all things work together for good to them that love God, we base this rejoicing because of what Jesus Christ has done.

Even when it seems that God's rule is only for our sorrow, we know for certain that because of what Christ has accomplished for us, this is not the entire picture.

Martin Rinckart, the son of a poor coppersmith, is the writer of the great hymn, Now Thank We All Our God.

“The plague of 1637 visited his home town where he served as archdeacon with extraordinary severity; the town was overcrowded with fugitives from the country districts where the Swedes had been spreading devastation, and in this one year 8,000 persons died in it.

The whole of the town council except three persons, a terrible number of school children, and the clergymen of the neighboring parish, were all carried off; and Rinckart had to do the work of three men, and did it manfully at the beds of the sick and dying.

He buried more than 4,000 persons, but through all his labours he himself remained perfectly well.

The pestilence was followed by a famine so extreme that thirty or forty persons might be seen fighting in the streets for a dead cat or crow.

Rinckart, with the burgomaster and one other citizen, did what could be done to organize assistance, and gave away everything but the barest rations for his own family, so that his door was surrounded by a crowd of poor starving wretches, who found it their only refuge.

“After all this suffering, the Swedish army came once more and imposed upon the unhappy town a sizeable tribute.

Rinckart ventured to the camp to plead the general for mercy, and when it was refused, turned to the citizens who followed him, saying, "Come, my children, we can find no hearing, no mercy with men, let us take refuge with God."

He fell on his knees, and prayed with such touching earnestness that the Swedish general relented, and lowered his demand at last to 2,000 florins.

So great were Rinckart's own losses and charities that he had the utmost difficulty in finding bread and clothes for his children, and was forced to mortgage his future income for several years.

“Yet how little his spirit was broken by all these calamities is shown by the hymn ‘Nun danket alle Gott’ and others that he wrote.”²

Know with complete certainty that God is at work for His glory and your good.

Prayer

Hymn: 86

Benediction – Hebrews 13:20-21

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen.

² <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Rinckart.htm>