

1

Providence- Slide 1

Slide 2

Q: What are God's works of providence?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism captures the biblical idea God's providence in an economy of words. As it answers the question it says-

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

—

Slide 3

Why are we studying God's providence in connection with the doctrine of God and more specifically, in connection with the doctrine of creation?

There is very good reason to place the study God's providence squarely on the heels of our study of creation generally and just prior to our study of the creation of man and woman, Lord willing, next week.

If you remember- last week it was established God is the all-powerful Creator.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth- God created all things out of nothing by His Word for his own glory.

The doctrine of providence now comes in to essentially answer the question- "how does the all-powerful God relate to his creation?" "What is God doing with, in, and through creation?"

—

Slide 4

Providence is a doctrine that keeps us from common errors and bad ideas, as we think about God's relationship to creation.

1. It keeps us from something known as deism- which teaches that God created the world only to abandon it. The creation is not a machine that God has set in motion.

2. It keeps us from the perennial error of pantheism- the idea that God is everything and everything is God. Those who are sympathetic to this view often traffic in God-talk and spirituality- making it vague and all inclusive. But it is a serious error. It effectively identifies God with the created thing. The created thing is not God. And God is not the created thing. This is an error plainly condemned in Scripture and God is zealous to guard the distinction.

Romans 1.25 tells us that we are not to exchange the truth about God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

—

Slide 5

3. It keeps us from fatalism or determinism.

The doctrine of fatalism says that events will inevitably and unalterably occur due to blind, mechanical forces. We have all heard the expression "Whatever will be will be."

The ancient stoic philosopher Seneca describes fatalism well- "everything moves forward according to a law that is fixed and passed for eternity. Fate is our guide, and the amount of time that remains for each of us was determined at the first hour of our birth"-

Fatalism *is not* the biblical doctrine of providence. God is not a blind mechanical force. Although both affirm that events will certainly and inevitably unfold, fatalism is shrouded in darkness- it is impersonal, and purposeless- it is a breeding ground for hopeless, meaningless, frustrated thinking.

The Scriptures do not permit such thinking. Providence is never a godless, impersonal thing. It is never an anonymous, nameless force at work in our lives. *Our good God stands at the center of providence.* Though he is gloriously transcendent, above his creation and not part of his creation, he is also graciously immanent, near, and personal.

—

#### Slide 6

Consider Psalm 8- David tells us in v.1 that God had set His glory above the heavens- he transcendently glorious.

1 O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

But David goes on to say-

4 what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? 5 Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.

Again, God is both transcendent and intimately involved in the affairs of men- and especially his children. He cares for us, he is mindful of us. The Scriptures never remove God from providence. God is always there, transcendent yet personal.

—

#### Slide 7

4. It keeps us from thinking that the events that take place in creation are related to randomness or chance. This type of thinking is fundamental to the doctrine of evolution. But the notion that events occur unbeknownst to God, or events occur outside of His control is foreign to the Bible.

Proverbs 16.33- The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

Matthew 10.29- Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

These are some of the reasons why the architects of the great confessions are quick to advance the doctrine of providence once they have established the doctrine of creation. Providence is an indispensable truth that clarifies God's relationship with His creation, and then forms this grid through which we understand all that unfolds in God's creation.

We must resist any tendencies to dismiss providence, to de-God providence, to see life as the result of chance- because if we do these things- we ignore this huge aspect of God's glory, and will rob ourselves of the comfort and hope that the doctrine ultimately brings us.

—

#### Slide 8

So before we go any further with our discussion of the biblical doctrine of God's providence, I want to say a few things about the comfort and hope that the doctrine affords.

God's providence undoubtedly enriches our Christian lives. It comforts and stabilizes, considered rightly it emboldens prayer and good works, experientially it brings the gloriously transcendent God into close proximity to his children, as we see him intimately involved in and orchestrating the finest details of our life.

In short it is of tremendous benefit to the believer. As we work through difficult things this morning, I want you to keep this in mind. The objective this morning isn't merely that we better fathom the mystery of providence. The objective is not that you embrace providence as some sort of philosophical system- that is not what it is. Providence is a confession of faith.

The objective is that we live lives better suited to bring glory to God. The objective is that "by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). Taking in the doctrine of God's providence by faith is essential to doing that.

The Belgic Confessions wonderfully captures this idea-

The doctrine affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father; who watches over us with paternal care, keeping all creatures so under his power, that "not a hair of our head (for they are all numbered), nor a sparrow, can fall to the ground, without the will of our Father", in whom we do entirely trust; being persuaded that He so restrains the devil and all our enemies that without His will and permission, they cannot hurt us. (Belgic Confession, article 13).

As we traverse some difficult things, please do not lose sight of these things. This is not an academic exercise fundamentally. This is an effort to be built up in our most holy faith.

—

Slide 9

God's Providence and God's Sovereignty-

It is helpful to conceive of providence in relation to God's sovereignty. When we think of sovereignty, we think of God's Lordship and omnipotence, his position and power, his reign and rule, his right and power to do all that he wills. Sovereign is something God is.

When we look at God's providence, we should think of his sovereignty on display- his reign and rule on display, with a particular focus on God's purpose and design as he does all that he wills. He rules and reigns providentially, with an infinitely wise and good purpose, powerfully bringing his eternal wise plans into time.

—

Slide 10

Providence and The Attributes of God

The study of Providence cannot be divorced from an understanding of God's attributes.

Listen to the opening movements of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689-

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 least, by his most wise and holy providence, to the end for 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.

We will revisit this definition of providence in a moment, but for now I want you to appreciate the essential place God's attributes- infinite power and wisdom, justice, infinite goodness, mercy. His attributes form the foundation for the doctrine.

Some of the most conspicuous attributes pertaining to God's providence are God's wisdom and power, in addition to his goodness. These attributes are mentioned twice- for good reason.

Nevertheless, all of his perfections are exercised and employed in his providential rule and reign. Providence flows from none other than the unchanging perfection of God's holy life, his glorious character, the perfection of his attributes. Never lose sight of who God is. Do not lose sight of his attributes. They bring proportion to and inform all of our doctrine. They will keep from misinterpreting providence- drawing wrong conclusions about God as his holy will unfolds.

—

#### Slide 11

##### God's Providence and God's Decree

We didn't have the luxury of covering God's decree in this class. But for those familiar with the doctrine of God's decree, it is helpful to think of providence in relation to God's decree. Let me explain.

What do we mean by God's decree?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines God's decree as "His eternal purpose according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass."

Think about the decree of God as the eternal divine blueprint or plan as it were- for whatsoever comes to pass. Think about providence as the act of carrying out that blueprint or plan, by guiding the actual course of history.

—

#### Slide 12

These two ideas- providence and decree- converge in Isaiah 46:8–13

8 "Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors,

9 remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me,

10 declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' (decree)

11 calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country.(providence) I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; (providence) I have purposed (decree), and I will do it. (providence)

The decree of God takes place in eternity. Providence takes place in history. Providence is God bringing his eternal decree to pass. Bringing His eternal wise plans into time.

—

## Slide 13

With this preliminary groundwork laid, I want to advance a more complete definition of providence, in fact, I will briefly mention 3 definitions. I give us multiple definitions because I want us to see the agreement that extends across a spectrum of Reformed thinking in this matter. Each articulation is clear and does not equivocate.

And though the word providence is not in the Bible, the truth articulated among those who are Reformed is absolutely biblical- and I want us to see that in a wide array of biblical texts. So, after carefully defining providence, we will then work through some biblical proofs that undergird this biblical reality.

—

Louis Berkof.

Berkof defines it as well as any. "Providence may be defined as that continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end."

—

## Slide 14

The 1689 LBCF.

"God the good Creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom does 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."

—

## Slide 15

Wayne Grudem.

Wayne Grudem helpfully offers the following definition of providence. He says, "God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill his purposes.

Again, this is a doctrine where disagreements abound in evangelicalism at large, but there is noteworthy consistency in Reformed thinking on this point- agreement and consistency that finds its origins in the OT and NT Scripture, comes to expression in the early church, and is then held forth very early on by the likes of Augustine, and eventually championed by the Reformers. We are in good company as we hold to the reformed doctrine of providence.

—

## Slide 16

There are 3 features that emerge in these definitions (and we could look at each definition in order to identify these three theological categories). They are as follows-

- 1.Preservation (or God's work of preserving the created order)
- 2.Concurrence (God is operative in all that comes to pass)

3. Government (the work of God directing and so governing all things to their appointed end).

These are theological terms, but do not let them intimidate you or distract you. At this point I want to give you some biblical exemplars/epitomizing texts for each category.

—

#### Slide 17

Preservation.

This is the truth that God keeps all created things existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them.

Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Christ is “upholding the universe by his word of power.” The Greek word translated “upholding” is *pherō*, meaning “to carry or bear.”

This is commonly used in the New Testament for carrying something from one place to another, such as bringing a paralyzed man on a bed to Jesus (Luke 5:18), bringing wine to the steward of the feast (John 2:8), or bringing a cloak and books to Paul (2 Tim. 4:13).

It does not mean simply “sustain,” but has the sense of active, purposeful control over the thing being carried from one place to another.

In Hebrews 1:3, the language also conveys the idea that Jesus is “**continually** carrying along all things” in the universe by his word of power.

In Colossians 1:17, Paul says of Christ that “in him all things hold together.” The phrase “all things” refers to every created thing in the universe. The verse affirms that Christ keeps all things existing.

Both verses indicate that if Christ were to cease his ongoing activity of sustaining all things in the universe, then everything except the triune God would instantly cease to exist.

Paul he says in Acts 17:28, “In him we live and move and have our being”

Nehemiah 9.6- “You are the Lord, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you”

—

#### Slide 18

God, in preserving all things he has made, also causes them to maintain the properties with which he created them.

For instance- God preserves wood in such a way that it continues to act like wood. He causes grass to continue to act like grass, with all its distinctive properties. Water behaves like water. It freezes at a set temperature; it vaporizes at a set temperature. He causes human bodies to behave and function like human bodies.

Therefore, it can be said that God’s providence provides a basis for science as we know it. God has made and continues to sustain a universe that acts in predictable ways. If a scientific experiment produces a given result today, then we can have confidence that (all things being equal) the same result will take place tomorrow and a hundred years from now.

The doctrine of providence also provides a foundation for technology: for instance electricity invariably follows a certain path not because “it has always worked that way,” but because God’s providence sustains a universe in which created things maintain the properties with which he created them.

In the EP world great, incremental strides have been made in dealing with irregular heartbeats using pacemakers and ablations, not because hearts tend to function in an unpredictable manner or because electricity behaves erratically, but because God's providential power ensures that things continue to function in a generally consistent and predictable manner. This is a good thing.

—

#### Slide 19

An important qualification is necessary at this point. God uses means for the realization of his sovereign purposes, and the laws of physics and nature are a part of those means.

But our confession so aptly reminds us of the rest of the story-

*God in his ordinary providence makes the use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at his pleasure.*

At the very least this reminds us that he is able to suspend the laws of nature and perform miracles. Let's not forget this. At the same time, we shouldn't ignore how God has generally ordered the universe and presume that God will operate on our behalf exclusively or characteristically through miracles apart from his appointed means.

If we want to avoid accidents, we should not text and drive as we are not made with the ability to focus on the road and our phones at the same time.

To prevent serious injury if the unthinkable happens, we should wear seatbelts. I am not saying miracles have not happened where people are somehow thrown from the vehicle when otherwise they would have been crushed. But the prospect of crashing through a windshield only to be thrown several feet from the vehicle is not how God generally preserves our life if we have a collision.

To stay healthy we nurture and care for our bodies on some level, maintaining certain levels of activity, exercising restraint in our eating patterns, visiting the doctor when we are not well. These generally are the appointed means for maintaining health.

Though some people seem to defy the laws of caloric intake and output, in the large majority of us the law of thermodynamics plays out pretty consistently.

We must study and prepare for our vocations.

For most of us, if we fail to plan deliberately, thoughtfully stewarding God's provision to us- saving for retirement or contributing generously to gospel work may prove difficult.

But we cannot reduce our lives to a mechanistic cause and effect either- *If A, then B is the forgone conclusion.* We are taught by the Lord himself to pray daily for things that we usually treat as givens, simply assumed- Give us this day our daily bread.

I will say more about means in the spiritual arena later.

—

#### Slide 20

Concurrence.

Theologians often employ the useful term concurrence to explain the reality that God and human beings both act at the same time so that the Lord's plan is fulfilled and our choices are really and truly our own.

In essence, concurrence says that two or more parties can act in the same event and produce a given outcome without all parties having the same intent.

—

#### Slide 21

Job's life is a good illustration of concurrence. In Job 1, we read of three major players in Job's suffering. Satan instigated the suffering by issuing a challenge to the Lord regarding Job's piety. God permitted Satan to bring suffering into Job's life.

As this played out in history, the Chaldeans and the Sabeans attacked Job's family and stole his livestock.

The intent of each party in producing the same outcome—Job's suffering—was different. Satan intended to discredit Job, and by extension, to discredit God. The intent of the Chaldeans and Sabeans was to enrich themselves. Our Lord's intent was to vindicate Job's faith and bring glory to himself.

Each of these players was necessarily involved in Job's suffering, but at different levels and with different motivations. There was a concurrence among them that Job should suffer, but each had a different reason for this suffering. God's intent was good. The other players intended evil.

Another passage that is instructive on this point is 2 Samuel 24.1 and 1 Chronicles 21.1

2 Samuel 24.1- "Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah."

Here God in his anger incites David to number the people, and then when David performs this prohibited action David is conscience-stricken and must ultimately choose one of three severe judgments that God metes out. The result is that seventy thousand people die.

The story of Job is important when we reflect on 2 Samuel 24 and God's incitement of David to sin by taking a census. The reason is that in 1 Chronicles 21.1, where the story is retold in a slightly different way, it is Satan and not God who incites David to number the people.

1 Chronicles 21.1 "Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel. "

To some this appears to be an unacceptable contradiction. Certainly the emphasis is different, but it is not a contradiction.

For instance- in the Job passage, one could say that Satan afflicts Job, or that God afflicts Job: both would be justified in their statement and from a certain perspective correct, because the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. And as you read Job, Job is oriented toward God as the ultimate cause for his suffering, that is part of the reason the suffering is so deep. He doesn't understand why God would ordain this level of loss given his settled allegiance to God. God doesn't disabuse him of the notion. Rather- He tells him to trust.

And there are numerous passages, like this one in 2 Samuel, 1 Chronicles and Job, where God is presented as in some way standing behind the evil. The bible use language to describe God as sending certain people a "strong delusion" so that they will believe the great lie (2 Thess. 2:11).

Of course, this introduces all sorts of difficult questions about secondary causes.

Nevertheless, God is presented as sovereign over David's life, including this particular sin in his life, yet David is still responsible for his actions. Both propositions are assumed to be true.

—



## Slide 22

In all of this, it is important to remember that the Bible insists that God is good, perfectly good. "He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he" (Deut. 32:4). "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

So in some sense, not readily apparent to the human observer, God is bringing about unspeakable good through it all, even in the sin of one of his most preeminent saints. This holds true for the sin in our life as well.

—

## Slide 23

The 1689 speaks to this, affirming that God can commandeer sin for his good purposes.

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God does often times 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.<sup>15</sup> So that whatsoever befalls any of His elect is by His appointment, for His glory, and their good.

—

## Slide 24

Coming full circle, the doctrine of concurrence helps explain how God can ordain evil and not be guilty of sin. He has a holy intent in all He ordains. Evil is evil, but the Lord never has an evil intent, and He never does evil Himself. But he does work through the evil intentions of others so as to fulfill His good intent.

And here we run headlong into mystery, and mystery makes us uncomfortable.

Three and a half centuries ago, it was not uncommon for Christians reflect deeply on 'the mystery of providence'. English Puritan John Flavel even wrote a book some of you are probably familiar with- entitled "The Mystery of Providence".

Perhaps one of the most helpful treatments of the mystery of providence that I have read is by D.A. Carson, who speaks about the mystery in at least two different books. One book is entitled "How Long, O Lord?" where he outlines the contours of the mystery of providence in relation to suffering and evil.

Another excellent book where he treats the mystery in the context of prayer is entitled "A Call to Spiritual Reformation" where he walks through several of Paul's prayers and offers up a theology of prayer that is very helpful. Both are worth reading.

As he walks the reader through a biblical framework to help them come to terms with the mystery of providence and sin and evil there are some things that he says which have stuck with me.

—

## Slide 25

Anytime we deal with providence responsibly and faithfully we must always hold fast to two fundamental biblical assertions-

1. God is absolutely sovereign

and

2. His sovereignty never functions in Scripture to reduce human responsibility.

These are absolute, inescapable givens.

Both propositions are taught and exemplified in the Bible. Part of our problem is believing that both are true. We tend to emphasize one at the expense of the other- or diminish the reality of one by focusing primarily on the other. But the Bible doesn't encourage us in this imbalance and oversimplified thinking.

—

Slide 26

As far the assertion about God's absolute sovereignty, we could review numerous Scriptures that speak about the extent of God's absolute sovereign providence. The Bible is filled with them.

Proverbs 16 tells us that God is so utterly sovereign that when you throw a die, which side comes up is determined by God (16:33).

"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD".

Regarding even the minutiae and seemingly inconsequential, God is there.

According to Jesus, if the birds are fed it is because the Father feeds them (Matt. 6:26); if wild flowers grow, it is because God clothes the grass (6:30).

Therefore God even stands behind what we describe as natural processes.

The prophets knew well the extent of God's sovereignty: "I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23).

The Psalmist tells us that- "The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths" (Psalm 135:6).

—

Slide 27

Perhaps one of the most definitive and all-encompassing passages is Ephesians 1.11 which says that God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11). No event in creation falls outside of his providence. Of course, this fact is hidden from our eyes unless we read it in Scripture. But it is the testimony of the Bible-

If we probe deeper, we see that in some mysterious way, and without being tainted with evil himself, God stands behind unintentional manslaughter (Exodus 21:13), family misfortune (Ruth 1:13), national disaster (Isaiah 45:6-7), personal grief (Lamentations 3:32-33, 37-38), even sin (1 Kings 22:21ff.).

God is absolutely sovereign.

—

Slide 28

In none of these cases, however, is human responsibility ever diminished. The Scriptures abound with this truth as well.

There are countless passages where human beings are commanded to obey, choose, believe, and are held accountable if they fail to do so.

God himself offers moving pleas to incite us to repentance, because he finds no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Isa. 30:18; 65:2; Lam. 3:31-36; Ezek. 18:30-32; 33:11).

The commanding invitation of the gospel itself assumes profound responsibility: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ... As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame'" (Rom. 10:9, 11).

None of this jeopardizes God's sovereignty: a few verses earlier in Romans we find the apostle quoting Exodus 33:19 to prove that "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom. 9:18).

Hundreds of passages could be explored to demonstrate that the Bible assumes both that God is sovereign, and that people are responsible for their actions.

—

#### Slide 29

In fact, not only does the Bible support both these truths in a large number of separate passages, both truths come together in many passages.

Perhaps the most famous in our circles is Genesis 50:19-20

After the death of their father, Jacob's sons approach Joseph and beg him not to take revenge on them for having sold him into slavery. Joseph's response is instructive: "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

What Joseph says is that in this one event same his brothers intended evil and God intended good. God is sovereign, working to save millions of people from starvation during the famine years, ensuring that prior promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob remain alive. But his sovereignty does not lessen the brothers' evil. Both God's sovereignty and human responsibility are assumed to be true.

—

#### Slide 30

Mystery and the Nature of God

So where do we go from here?

First, we must refuse to think of God's sovereignty and human responsibility as embracing some sort of deep contradiction. There is mystery in them. But we cannot think of them as mutually exclusive. Christianity is not contradictory nonsense. It invokes mystery; it does not invoke nonsense.

That means, for instance, that we must be careful with the notion of human freedom.

—

#### Slide 31

*Free will?*

Many Christians today think that if human beings are to be thought of as morally responsible creatures, they must be free to choose, to believe, to disobey, and so forth.

But what does "freedom" mean? Sometimes without thinking about it, *we assume that such freedom must entail the power to work outside God's sovereignty.*

Freedom, we think, involves no constraints, even that of God's sovereign control. Therefore- if God's sovereignty truly presides over and stands above our decisions, then our finite and fallen minds assume that such sovereign control is incompatible with freedom. And if we are not free, how can we be held morally accountable?

But the Bible does not tie moral accountability to freedom in the absolute sense.

Consider Acts 4.26-28:

“Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’—27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

Here we see Herod and Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and the Jews conspiring together. And even though they did what God's power and will had determined beforehand should be done- they nevertheless did what they wanted to do. They wanted to rage. They chose to conceive of schemes. They gathered together against the Lord and his anointed. And in doing so they were doing whatever God's hand and plan had predestined to take place.

This is why many theologians have refused to tie "freedom" to absolute power to act contrary to God's will. They tie it, rather, *to desire, to what human beings voluntarily choose.*

Joseph's brothers did what they wanted to do; Herod and Pilate and the religious elite did what they wanted to do, David did what he wanted to do.

In each case, God's sovereignty was operating behind the scenes: the human participants, to use the language of the early Christians, did what God's power and plan had decided beforehand should happen. But that did not excuse them. *They did what they wanted to do.*

—

Slide 32

Second, it is vital to see that God does not stand behind good and evil in exactly the same way. What do we mean by this?

The Bible insists God is sovereign, so sovereign that nothing that takes place in the universe can escape the outermost boundary of his control; yet the Bible insists God is good, unreservedly good, the very standard of goodness, whose purposes are always good.

James 1.17- Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

*Because God is absolute good-* we are driven to conclude that God does not stand behind good and evil in exactly the same way. In other words, he stands behind good and evil asymmetrically.

He stands behind good in such a way that the good can ultimately be credited to him; he stands behind evil in such a way that what is evil is inevitably credited to secondary agents and all their evil intentions.

The result is that the evil in the world does not escape his sway- in exactly the same way that Satan has no power over Job without God's sanction; yet God remains mysteriously distant from evil itself.

As Christians, we are prepared to accept certain mysteries. We confess that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God yet there is but one God. Christian thinkers across the ages have taken pains to show how there is no necessary contradiction in such an understanding of the trinitarian character of God, even if there are huge swaths of mystery involved. Providence is one of the mysteries we must accept.

Perhaps it is the way that God stands outside time and space that enables him to handle secondary causes the way he does. After all, what does time look like to a transcendent God? Here we simply stumble, unable to peer over the fence of mystery. And, sometimes it is more important to worship such a God than to fully comprehend. We must live with tensions and mysteries.

---

### Slide 33

So to summarize- we as Christians must hold together, without being moved, three biblical truths: God's sovereignty, human accountability, and God's goodness. Each of these strands are undeniable, held together they give rise to numerous questions.

But we must apply them to our lives, doing so in such a way that we avoid, on the one hand, superficial optimism, and on the other, presumptuous pessimism or robotic fatalism- instead we are to exhibit a steadfast faith in the manifold perfections of God- wholly relying on God for grace.

In my experience, providence can breed questions, it creates mystery, but I want to be careful not to overstate the case and give the impression that every serious-minded Christian who encounters the "problem of evil" is then is tossed overboard into a river of continuous existential crisis. We are those, who by the Word and by the Spirit, have our eyes and hearts opened and our souls reorient to God as he truly is- sovereign, holy, merciful and good. We know that God is too pure to look on evil, let alone commit sin. We know God by means of knowing Christ, something of his glory and goodness in the gospel, and that alone is enough to dispel constant pestering thoughts about the nature of God's providence.

—

### Slide 34

Government.

We have discussed the first two aspects of providence, (1) preservation and (2) concurrence. This third aspect of God's providence indicates that God has a purpose in all he does in the world and that he providentially governs or directs all things in order that they accomplish his purposes.

We read in the Psalms, "His kingdom rules over all" (103:19).

Moreover, Nebuchadnezzar, a great and proud and foolish king was brought to confess "he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What are you doing?' " (Dan. 4:35).

—

### Slide 35

It is important to realize that the government of the world has now been placed into the hands of the risen and ascended Christ. It is the risen and ascended Christ who possesses all authority in heaven and earth (Matthew 28.18). It is Christ who sits in the place of highest honor at the right hand of God (Acts 2.34). It is Christ who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

—

### Slide 36

Finally the idea of God's governing providence implies that his providence has a goal *or telos*. The great goal of God is the glorification of his own name, by bringing to perfection the creatures on whom he has set his love. He is wisely and powerfully moving all things to that grand end. "For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36).

I can describe God's governing providence no better than the apostle Paul when said-

"God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28 NASB).

—

Slide 37

The comforts and application of this doctrine are many-

Most fundamentally we must be arrested by the truth that God is in control. Revelation 19.6- "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns".

Second, we should buy up the truth that God is good, always good, absolute good, and do not sell it. Even if we are suffering, we must remember that all that God does is good and right.

Third it should call us to repentance. God employs means and secondary causes in a predictable fashion. We are to use holy means to accomplish holy ends. Prayer, Bible intake, corporate worship, fellowship for the health of your soul. If we fail to avail ourselves to means of grace- we do so at our own peril. *For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption*. The converse is true as well, which means that we should engage in the means of grace with confident expectation- *but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life*.

Philippians 2:12-13 is very instructive on this point-

Paul writes, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (2:12-13).

Paul does not tell his readers to work out their own salvation, since God has done his part and now it is all up to them. Nor does he tell them that God does everything, and they just need to "Let go and let God" in some sort of spiritual passivity. Rather, he tells them to work out their own salvation precisely because it is God working in them, both at the level of their will and at the level of their actions ("to will and to act according to his good purpose").

So here not only is God sovereign, but God's sovereignty is so extensive that it includes our will and our action- and this realization is to serve as *an incentive to confident action in the spiritual arena*.

So often, as we come to terms with divine sovereignty and providence, we can lapse into a state of spiritual lethargy. A soul sickness that manifests in prayerlessness, sinful patterns, a callous disregard for the lost and global missions and the church.

Here we desperately need instruction in the distinction between primary causes, God being the first and ultimate cause of all things, and the indispensable role of secondary causes. To put it biblically- we must learn to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in us-

One pastor theologian explains that God has endowed his creatures with causality- not only are we responsible and accountable for our actions- God has ordained that our actions can and do have real effects.

God uses means to bring about certain results in our lives. Our patterns of thought, behavior, and prayer are part of those means. John Calvin writes: God's providence doesn't always meet us in its naked form, but God in a sense clothes it with the means employed.

Our confession tells us that- *God, in His ordinary providence maketh use of means-*

Therefore, God *ordinarily* uses means for the realization of His sovereign purposes- this means that in all our decisions and actions, *we must determine the best ends*, in accordance with the teaching of the Scripture, *the best means to achieve those ends*, again in accordance with the teaching of the Scripture, and then leave the results with God.

Providence should therefore reinforce, not fatalism, not carelessness, but a confident industry in holy things, knowing that God's pattern is to work through those means that he has appointed. We should not adopt a pattern of life that is largely presumptuous, assuming he will work despite neglecting his clearly appointed means.

Another application-

His providential love and care pours into our lives individually as Christians- such that we should not give ourselves over to sinful anxiety-

29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

In a careful and habitual meditation on God's providence, you lay the ax at the root of our blame-shifting, our discontent, our complaining, and ingratitude.

---

Slide 38

"But so, as the almighty and everywhere present power of God, it makes us grateful when things go well and patient when things go against us, prompts us to rest with childlike submission in the guidance of the Lord and at the same time arouses us from our inertia to the highest levels of activity. In all circumstances of life, it gives us good confidence in our faithful God and Father that he will provide whatever we need for body and soul and that he will turn to our good whatever adversity he sends us in this sad world, since he is able to do this as almighty God and desires to do this as a faithful Father." – Herman Bavinck