



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 10 - March 09 2008

27 **Q.** *What do you understand by the providence of God*

A. Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that lead and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand.

28 **Q.** *How does the knowledge of God's creation and providence help us?*

A. We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing will separate us from his love. All creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they can neither move nor be moved.

Lord's Day 10 is my favorite. I especially love Q/A 27. Providence is a sweet word because it means that nothing in life comes by sheer luck or a roll of the cosmic dice. Rather, all things come to us from the loving hand of our heavenly Father.

"Sovereignty" is the word we hear more often. That's a good word too. But if people run out of the room crying whenever you talk to them about sovereignty, try using the word "providence." For some people God's sovereignty sounds like nothing but raw, capricious power. "God has absolute power over all things and you better get used to it." That's true in a sense, but divine sovereignty, we must not forget, is sovereignty-for-us. As Eric Liddel's dad remarked in *Chariots of Fire*, God may be a dictator, but "Aye, he is a benign, loving dictator."

For many Christians, coming to grips with God's all-encompassing providence requires a massive shift in how they look at the world. It requires changing our vantage point—from seeing the cosmos as a place where man rules and God responds, to beholding a universe where God creates and constantly controls with sovereign love and providential power. Look at what the Catechism says about providence. It is simply stunning. Rain comes from God's hand, and food and drink and prosperity too. But drought also comes from our heavenly Father, not to mention sickness and lean years and poverty. Babies come from God's fatherly hand. So does infertility. Housing booms and foreclosure busts. Miraculous re-

coveries and seemingly senseless tragedies. The stranger who shows up out of the blue and fixes your flat and the stranger who turns out wickedly sinister. These things are not accidents in God's grand scheme of things. It is not blind fate that causes some to grow gracefully into old age and see their children's grandchildren. Nor is it bad luck when a young father dies too soon.

Underline the "all" in "all things...come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand." I will sometimes ask seminary students being examined for ordination, "How would the Heidelberg Catechism, particularly Lord's Day 10, help you minister to someone who lost a loved one in 9/11 or lost everything in Katrina or just lost a job." I am usually disappointed to hear students who should be affirming the confessions of their denomination shy away from Heidelberg's strong, biblical language about providence. Like most of us, the students are much more at ease using passive language about God's permissive will or comfortable generalities about God being "in control" than they are about stating precisely and confidently to those in the midst of suffering "this has come from God's fatherly hand." And yet, that's what the Catechism, and more importantly the Bible, teaches.

Let me be clear: God's providence is not an excuse to act foolishly or sinfully. Herod and Pontius Pilate, though they did what God had planned beforehand, were still wicked conspirators (Acts 4:25-28). The Bible

affirms human responsibility. But the Bible also affirms, much more massively and frequently than we imagine, God's power and authority over all things. The nations are under God's control (Psalm 2:1-4; 33:10), as is nature (Mark 4:41; Psalm 135:7; 147:18; 148:8), and animals (2 Kings 17:25; Dan. 6:22; Matt. 10:29). God is sovereign over Satan and evil spirits (Matt. 4:10; 2 Cor. 12:7-8; Mark 1:27). God uses wicked people for his plans—not just in a “bringing good out of evil” sort of way, but in an active, intentional, “this was God's plan from the get-go” sort of way (Job 12:16; John 19:11; Gen. 45:8; Luke 22:22; Acts 4:27-28). God hardens hearts (Ex. 14:17; Josh. 11:20; Rom. 9:18). God sends trouble and calamity (Judg. 9:23; 1 Sam. 1:5; 16:14; 2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Kings 22:20-23; Isa. 45:6-7; 53:10; Amos 3:6; Ruth 1:20; Eccl. 7:14). God even puts to death (1 Sam. 2:6, 25; 2 Sam 12:15; 2 Chr. 10:4, 14; Deut. 32:39). God does what he pleases and his purposes cannot be thwarted (Isa. 46:9-10; Dan. 4:34-35). In short, God guides all our steps and works all things after the counsel of his will (Prov. 16:33; 20:24; 21:2; Jer. 10:23; Psalm 139:16; Rom. 8:21; Eph. 1:11).

These verses are not meant to pound you into submission until you make a second conversion to Reformed theology. I list dozens of verses for two reasons: First, so you can check this teaching out for yourself and see that God's superintendence over all things is not a Calvinistic creation, but the unavoidable conclusion writ large on the pages of Scripture. And second, so you will move past merely tolerating God's sovereignty to joyously embracing it. If God's providence is found so often in the Bible that its truth is unavoidable, maybe God doesn't mean for us to avoid it.

Remember, Lord's Day 10 is explaining what the Creed means when it says, “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” If God is the creator of all things and truly almighty, then he must continue to be almighty over all that he has created. And if God is a Father, then surely he exercises his authority over his creation and creatures for the good of his beloved children. Providence is nothing more than a belief in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, brought to bear on the present and buoying our hope into the future.

You can look at providence through the lens of human autonomy and our idolatrous notions of freedom and see a mean God moving tsunamis and kings like chess pieces in some kind of perverse divine-play time. Or you can look at providence through the lens of Scripture and see a loving God counting the hairs on our heads

and directing the sparrows in the sky so that we might live life unafraid. Providence is for our comfort. That's why Calvin loved this doctrine. “What else can we wish for ourselves,” he wrote, “if not even one hair can fall from our head without his will?” There are no accidents in your life. Nothing has been left to chance. Every economic downturn, every phone call in the middle of the night, every oncology report has been sent to us from the God who sees all things, plans all things, and loves us more than we know. Whether it means the end of suffering or the extension of suffering, God in his providence is for us and not against us.

Providence meant three things for Calvin: “Gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future” (Inst. I.xvii.7). Answer 28 picks up on the same three benefits.

(1) We can be patient when things go against us. I get cranky in adversity because I see my plans being overturned. But I must remember, God's plan is still in place. Joseph's imprisonment makes sense now, slavery in Egypt makes sense now, killing the Messiah makes sense now—so maybe God knows what he's doing through the pain in my life and yours.

(2) We can be thankful when things go well. How often do we pray for safe travel or healing or a spouse or a job and then never get around to thanking God on the other side of blessing. If we truly believe in providence, we will view success and prosperity not as products of good upbringing, good looks, or good intelligence, but ultimately as the unmerited favor of a good God.

(3) We can have confidence for the future. I am not by nature a worrier, but even I get anxious when I think about global recession, chronic illness, or something happening to my kids. I fear what the future may hold. But I shouldn't if I trust the one who holds the future. The fact of the matter is all my worries may come true, but God will never be untrue to me. He will always lead me, always listen to me, and always love me in Christ. God moves in mysterious ways, so I may not always understand why life is what it is. But it helps me face the future unafraid to know that nothing moves, however mysterious, except by the hand of that great Unmoved Mover who moves all and is moved by none, the God who is my Father in heaven.

~Kevin DeYoung