

SESSION 7: The Fingerprints of God

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 24-26:

WCF	WLC	WSC
5	18-19	11

Introduction

Shorter Catechism #8 tells us that “God executeth his decrees in the works of creation and providence.” In our last session, we looked at the first of these works – the work of creation. In this session, we turn to God’s works of providence. One of the present author’s seminary professors once said, “Providence is God’s fingerprints.” This helpful image will set the tone for our discussion.

“Do It Again”

One of the best summary definitions of providence is found in WSC 11: “God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.” Remembering that ‘creatures’ includes both the natural world and all living things, we have here a comprehensive statement that God *actively* sustains and orders the universe. As Scripture testifies, “he upholds the universe by the word of his power,” (Heb 1.3).

It’s worth pausing to consider how directly this doctrine runs counter to the prevailing spirit of our age. Ever since the European Enlightenment, there has been a strong current of thought in theological circles known as ‘Deism.’ Though Deism may allow for God’s *creative* work, it denies his *sustaining* and *ordering* work. God is compared to a clock-maker who built the universe, wound it up, and then walked away. As Tim Keller points out, such thinking has massive ramifications:

The idea of Deism is that God created the world for our benefit and now it operates on its own, without his constant or direct involvement. This world works like a clock and can be understood scientifically, without any need for divine revelation. In this understanding of things, God exists but becomes someone or something more distant, not someone we can know. Our main responsibility is not to love, worship, and obey him, seeking his forgiveness when we fail to do so. Instead, human beings’ main purpose is to use our reason and free will to support human flourishing. In short, the older Christian idea that we exist for God’s glory receded and was replaced by the belief that God exists to nurture and sustain us.⁶³

We may think that we and our churches are immune to such thinking, but none of us remains completely unaffected by the way our society thinks. For instance, how frequently do we consider that even inanimate objects and natural laws play their music under the active direction of the divine conductor? Calvin reminds us:

Concerning inanimate objects we ought to hold that, although each one has by nature been endowed with its own property, yet it does not exercise its own power except in so far as it is directed by God’s ever-present hand. These are, thus, nothing but instruments to which God continually imparts as much effectiveness as he wills, and according to his own purpose bends and turns them to either one action or another.⁶⁴

To flesh out this teaching, he cites the example of the sun:

⁶³ Timothy J. Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 54.

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.2.

No creature has a force more wondrous or glorious than that of the sun. For besides lighting the whole earth with its brightness, how great a thing is it that by its heat it nourishes and quickens all living things! That with its rays it breathes fruitfulness into the earth! That it warms the seeds in the bosom of the earth, draws them forth with budding greenness, increases and strengthens them, nourishes them anew, until they rise up into stalks! That it feeds the plant with continual warmth, until it grows into flower, and from flower into fruit! That then, also, with baking heat it brings the fruit to maturity! That in like manner trees and vines warmed by the sun first put forth buds and leaves, then put forth a flower, and from the flower produce fruit! ... Nothing is more natural than for spring to follow winter; summer, spring; and fall, summer— each in turn. Yet in this series one sees such great and uneven diversity that it readily appears each year, month, and day is governed by a new, a special, providence of God.⁶⁵

It is, indeed, true that the several kinds of things are moved by a secret impulse of nature, as if they obeyed God's eternal command, and what God has once determined flows on by itself. At this point we may refer to Christ's statement that from the very beginning he and the Father were always at work (John 5.17); and to Paul's teaching that "in him we live, move, and have our being" (Acts 17.28); also, what the author of The Letter to the Hebrews says, meaning to prove the divinity of Christ, that all things are sustained by his mighty command (Heb. 1.3). But they wrongly conceal and obscure by this excuse that special providence which is so declared by sure and clear testimonies of Scripture that it is a wonder anyone can have doubts about it.⁶⁶

Inanimate objects are not self-existent, nor are natural laws a force unto themselves. Rather, they are instruments in the hands of God. The regularity in these objects and operations neither implies nor requires a lack of personality. G.K. Chesterton put it memorably:

Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."⁶⁷

Ordinary and Extraordinary – the Regular and the Miraculous

There are two types of providence in the universe. The first type is called *ordinary* – those operations of providence that God orders "to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently," (WCF 5.2). Calvin's discussion of inanimate objects and the sun falls under this heading. 'Ordinary' here does not mean *lackluster*, but rather *regular*.

Extraordinary providence occurs when God works "without, above, and against [second causes], at His pleasure," (WCF 5.3). Miracles fall into this category, and accordingly we may define a miracle as an *exercise of God's supernatural power executed without recourse to second causes*. Continuing with his discussion of the sun, Calvin points out that God may use it in very different-than-ordinary ways:

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 1.17.4.

⁶⁷ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image, 2001), 58.

A godly man will not make the sun either the principal or the necessary cause... but merely the instrument that God uses because he so wills; for with no more difficulty he might abandon it, and act through himself. Then when we read that at Joshua's prayers the sun stood still in one degree for two days (Josh 10.13), and that its shadow went back ten degrees for the sake of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 20.11 or Isa. 38.8), God has witnessed by those few miracles that the sun does not daily rise and set by a blind instinct of nature but that he himself, to renew our remembrance of his fatherly favor toward us, governs its course.⁶⁸

The Schoolroom of Providence

What lessons can we learn from the doctrine of God's providence? Calvin draws four lessons:

1. *We should banish superstition.* "We are superstitiously timid, I say, if whenever creatures threaten us or forcibly terrorize us we become as fearful as if they had some intrinsic power to harm us, or might wound us inadvertently and accidentally, or there were not enough help in God against their harmful acts... Let him, therefore, who would beware of this infidelity ever remember that there is no erratic power, or action, or motion in creatures, but that they are governed by God's secret plan in such a way that nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by him... providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events."⁶⁹
2. *We should seek to live wisely.* "Man's heart plans his way, but the Lord will direct his steps' (Prov 16.9). This means that we are not at all hindered by God's eternal decrees either from looking ahead for ourselves or from putting all our affairs in order, but always in submission to his will. The reason is obvious. For he who has set the limits to our life has at the same time entrusted to us its care; he has provided means and helps to preserve it; he has also made us able to foresee dangers; that they may not overwhelm us unaware, he has offered precautions and remedies... the Lord has inspired in men the arts of taking counsel and caution, by which to comply with his providence in the preservation of life itself."⁷⁰
3. *In the face of adversity or treachery, we should focus on our Father's good purposes in them.* "If Joseph had stopped to dwell upon his brothers' treachery, he would never have been able to show a brotherly attitude toward them. But since he turned his thoughts to the Lord, forgetting the injustice, he inclined to gentleness and kindness, even to the point of comforting his brothers... If Job had turned his attention to the Chaldeans, by whom he was troubled, he would immediately have been aroused to revenge; but because he at once recognized it as the Lord's work, he comforts himself with this most beautiful thought: "The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1.21)... To sum this up: when we are unjustly wounded by men, let us overlook their wickedness (which would but worsen our pain and sharpen our minds to revenge), remember to mount up to God, and learn to believe for certain that whatever our enemy has wickedly committed against us was permitted and sent by God's just dispensation."⁷¹
4. *We should live free of anxieties.* "Innumerable are the evils that beset human life; innumerable, too, the deaths that threaten it... Embark upon a ship, you are one step away from death. Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is imperiled. Go through the city streets, you are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs. If there is a weapon in your hand or a friend's, harm awaits. All the fierce animals you see are armed for your destruction. But if you try to shut yourself up in a walled garden, seemingly delightful, there a serpent sometimes lies hidden. Your house, continually in danger of fire, threatens in the daytime to impoverish you, at night even to collapse upon you. Your field, since it is exposed to hail, frost, drought, and other calamities, threatens you with barrenness, and hence, famine. I pass over poisonings, ambushes, robberies, open violence, which in part besiege us at home, in part dog us abroad. Amid these tribulations must not man be most miserable, since, but half alive in life, he weakly draws his anxious and languid breath, as if he had a sword perpetually hanging over his neck? ...Yet, when that light of divine providence has once shone upon a godly man, he is then relieved and set free not only from the extreme anxiety and fear that were pressing him before, but from every care. For as he justly dreads fortune, so he fearlessly dares commit himself to God."⁷²

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.16.3-4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.17.4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1.17.8.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1.17.10-11.

Evil and Intention

Our standards also give us helpful guidance in dealing with the problem of evil. Biblically, what can we safely say about the existence and exercise of evil in a world in which all things fall out according to the providence of an infinitely and unchangeable good God? Our confession gives us two solid planks. Firstly, we must confess that *God is in control*.⁷³ Even when he gives Satan express permission to harass us (see Job 1), he holds the devil's lease and turns the Enemy's malice to ultimate good (see Job 42). Secondly, we must confess that *God is not culpable*. He is neither the author nor the approver of sin.⁷⁴

How is this possible? Theologian John Gerstner points to *intention* as the key distinction.⁷⁵ When angels or men commit evil, they do so with the intention of violating the commandments of their Creator. Such actions, whatever the outcome, are sin and liable to everlasting judgment. Nor can we ever justify sinful actions by claiming we intended them for an ultimate good. This is an impossibility for two reasons: 1) we are not omnipotent, and can never guarantee an outcome; and 2) in claiming we should do something God forbids, we are putting ourselves in the place of God – an action which itself is the most basic form of sin. For creatures, therefore, ethics are always governed by the absolute standard of God's moral law.

God's providence, however, intends always to bring about the ultimate magnification of God's glory – his wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. Since God is omnipotent, the attainment of this goal is always guaranteed. Moreover, since *God is God*, he is perfectly within his rights as our Creator to do with us or to us whatever he pleases for whatever purpose he deems right. His providence is therefore always good – even where it extends “to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men,” (WCF 5.4).

Put another way: for creatures, even the end *never* justifies the means; yet for God, the end *always* justifies the means. As Joseph said to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today,” (Genesis 50.20). The same event, intended for evil by men, was intended by God for good.

Summarizing the believing response to the philosophical problem of evil, Tim Keller writes: “If you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have (at the same moment) a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know. Indeed, you can't have it both ways.”⁷⁶

What are these good reasons? Our confession lists several in WCF 5.5.

⁷³ The proof texts for WCF 5.4 include 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.’” Adjacent to this, they include 1 Chronicles 21.1: “Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.” The confession also cites Acts 2.23: “...this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”

⁷⁴ Here the proof texts for WCF 5.4 point to James 1.13-14: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” Also 1 John 2.16: “For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world.”

⁷⁵ See the discussion of “The Nonproblem of Evil” in John H. Gerstner, *Primitive Theology: the Collected Primers of John H. Gerstner* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), 41-49.

⁷⁶ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 25.

“Behind a Frowning Providence...”

Though the existence of evil may be less of a problem than it first appeared *philosophically*, it is still a monster of a problem *existentially*. When suffering hits our experience, what resources do Christian believers possess? Keller suggests four:

In ancient times, Christianity was widely recognized as having superior resources for facing evil, suffering, and death. In modern times— though it is not as publicly discussed— it continues to have assets for sufferers arguably far more powerful than anything secular culture can offer. Those assets, however, reside in robust, distinctive Christian beliefs.

The first relevant Christian belief is in a personal, wise, infinite, and therefore inscrutable God who controls the affairs of the world— and that is far more comforting than the belief that our lives are in the hands of fickle fate or random chance. The second crucial tenet is that, in Jesus Christ, God came to earth and suffered with and for us sacrificially— and that is far more comforting than the idea that God is remote and uninvolved. The cross also proves that, despite all the inscrutability, God is for us. The third doctrine is that through faith in Christ’s work on the cross, we can have assurance of our salvation... We are assured that the difficulties of life are not payment for our past sins, since Jesus has paid for them. As Luther taught, suffering is unbearable if you aren’t certain that God is for you and with you. Secularity cannot give you that, and religions that provide salvation through virtue and good works cannot give it, either.

The fourth great doctrine is that of the bodily resurrection from the dead for all who believe. This completes the spectrum of our joys and consolations. One of the deepest desires of the human heart is for love without parting. Needless to say, the prospect of the resurrection is far more comforting than the beliefs that death takes you into nothingness or into an impersonal spiritual substance. The resurrection goes beyond the promise of an ethereal, disembodied afterlife. We get our bodies back, in a state of beauty and power that we cannot today imagine. Jesus’ resurrection body was corporeal— it could be touched and embraced, and he ate food. And yet he passed through closed doors and could disappear. This is a material existence, but one beyond the bounds of our imagination. The idea of heaven can be a consolation for suffering, a compensation for the life we have lost. But resurrection is not just consolation— it is restoration. We get it all back— the love, the loved ones, the goods, the beauties of this life— but in new, unimaginable degrees of glory and joy and strength.⁷⁷

With these, Calvin would not disagree. However, he would add one further resource – the Christian belief in a final judicial reckoning. All the wrongs ever done will finally and perfectly put right:

Since we see the pious laden with afflictions by the impious, stricken with unjust acts, overwhelmed with slanders, wounded with abuses and reproaches; while the wicked on the contrary flourish, are prosperous, obtain repose with dignity and that without punishment – we must straightway conclude that there will be another life in which iniquity is to have its punishment, and righteousness is to be given its reward. Furthermore, since we observe that believers are often chastised by the Lord’s rods, we may with full assurance believe that one day the wicked must no less suffer his lash.⁷⁸

Of all these, perhaps the most pastoral is the second – as even Keller admits: “If we again ask the question: ‘Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue?’ and we look at the cross of Jesus, we still do not know what the answer is. However, we now know what the answer isn’t. It can’t be that he doesn’t love us. It can’t be that he is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Keller, *Walking with God*, 58-59.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.10.

⁷⁹ Keller, *Reason for God*, 30-31.

“...He Hides a Smiling Face”

The most fundamental and important ministry to suffering people is our *presence*. Though Job’s three friends began to err as soon as they spoke, they were surely right in their initial response: “They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great,” (Job 2.11-13). We would do likewise to heed their example. Though we must be very careful in what we speak, we should be ever-ready to be there.

If the Lord gives us an opportunity to speak, we may gently and sympathetically offer suffering brothers and sisters a number of biblical *promises*. We can point them to Jesus’ attitude toward suffering – what he intends to do about it (1 Cor 15.26, Rev 21.3-4). We may point them to God’s presence in the midst of suffering (Ps 34.18, 1 Cor 10.13; cf. Dan 3.24-25). We should confess to them that there may well be life-long mystery about what happens (Dt 29.29, Is 55.8-9) – yet we can assure them of God’s good purpose in all trials (Gen 50.20, 2 Cor 4.16-18, Rom 8.28). Finally, we may remind them of the proof of who loves them – and to what extent (1 Jn 4.9-11).

Our confession ends with a reminder that, in midst of his general providence, God exercises a special care for the church (WCF 5.7). Calvin called this the “principal purpose of biblical history”:

The principal purpose of Biblical history is to teach that the Lord watches over the ways of the saints with such great diligence that they do not even stumble over a stone (cf. Ps. 91.12). Therefore... it is important that we recognize this special care toward us. Whence Christ, when he declared that not even a tiny sparrow of little worth falls to earth without the Father’s will (Matt 10.29), immediately applies it in this way: that since we are of greater value than sparrows, we ought to realize that God watches over us with all the closer care (Matt 10.31); and he extends it so far that we may trust that the hairs of our head are numbered (Matt 10.30). What else can we wish for ourselves, if not even one hair can fall from our head without his will? I speak not only concerning mankind; but, because God has chosen the church to be his dwelling place, there is no doubt that he shows by singular proofs his fatherly care in ruling it.⁸⁰

All things are in God’s hands. The hands that hung the stars are the hands that were nailed to the cross – and will someday wipe away every tear from our eyes (Rev 21.4).

Important Questions

1. In the face of tragedy, is it appropriate to say, “God didn’t do this.”?
2. What lessons have you learned from instances of “frowning providence”? How might they equip you to minister to others?

Additional Resources

Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*.

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 27-29, 45-46, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
6, 9	21-29, 149	13-19, 82

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.6.