

God's Decrees in Providence
Applied to Suffering and Christian Contentment
WCF 5

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 leaf 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.
(Q.# 27, Heidelberg Catechism)

God's works of providence are his most holy wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions." (Westminster Shorter Catechism. Q # 11)

WCF 5:1-4

1. God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

Through God's providence, he "preserves and governs" all his people and all their actions:

Preserves: **Psm.46:1-2**

Governs: **Prov. 16:1, Philipians 2:13. Psm. 103:19**

1. Why "God, the great Creator of all things..." ?

Heb.1:2-3, ...his Son... through whom also he created the world... upholding the universe by his word of power.

Psalms 104, (excerpts) Blessed be the Lord, O my Soul, O Lord you are very great...

You set the earth on its foundations so that it shall never be shaken... you cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to use... O Lord how manifold are your works, In wisdom you have made them all... Bless the Lord!

Why start this article of faith with reference to God the great Creator? What is the relation to "Providence"

Idea: Natural laws and order indicates a present sustaining power of God in creation.

Thus, all natural laws and how they work out specifically in the course of our lives are also "decreed" by God and accountable to his sovereign wisdom per Chapter 3.

2. Note another Reformational absolute: "all." God directs, disposes, and governs "*all creatures, actions, and things*". In Daniel 4:34-35, these are specified as things both in heaven and on earth.

Reaches to all the creatures of God and all their actions.

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. But God raised him up...

Acts 4:27, ... Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place...

Acts 17:25-28, "The God who make the world, and everything in it.. he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation... He is not far from every one of us; for in him we live, and move, and have our being..."

3. What two adjectives describe the providence by which God governs all things?
How ought this to motivate obedience?
How ought this to produce comfort?

4. Does God's providence sometimes use "secondary causes"?

2. Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

5. What is the significance of affirming that God's ordering of things causes them to "fall out...either necessarily, freely, or contingently"?

As distinguished from "chance" or "fate":

"There is no such thing under the divine government, or providence, as real chance or accident... This surely is a most cheering doctrine. What could be more gloomy than to believe that our dearest interests, even life itself, might lie at the mercy of blind or misguided chance? On the contrary, how consoling to know that nothing can befall us, nothing injure us, without the direction or permission of our heavenly Father!" (Asbel Green)

6. How does section 3 define God's "ordinary providence"?

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

7. What word do we commonly use to talk about his "extraordinary providence"?

How to define "Miracle":

Locke: *Above reason but not contrary to reason.*

(Assumes a "faith" qualification of reason such that the idea of a transcendent and supernatural are not contrary to reason, but rather reasonable.)

Two categories of miracles: (p.17ff, C. Brown, *History and Faith*)

1. "Coincidence concept": No apparent violation of the laws of nature but a conjunction of circumstances that is so unexpected, improbable and beneficial to at least suggest a supernatural ordering of circumstances. (I.e. A unique directing of Providence given a certain set of circumstances)

2. "Violations of the law of nature" : It is impossible and yet it happened.

D. Hume: "A transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity or by the interposition of some invisible agent."

(I.e. *super natural*)

Observations:

1. # 1 is no less divine than # 2.

2. What is some generations would qualify as # 2 might in subsequent generations qualify as # 1. Yet this doesn't call to question the reality of # 2, nor distract from the significance of the "miracle" as attesting the power of God and His message.

A.A.Hodge: *Thus the order of nature and miracles, instead of being in conflict, are the intimately correlated elements of one comprehensive system.* (p.99)

Classical Understanding of the function of "miracles"

Deuteronomy 13:1ff, *If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods," (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them", you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams...* (See Mt.24:24 & Mk.13:22)

Mark 16:20, *"And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it."*

J. Calvin: "Miracles strengthen the authority of God's messengers. Now these very numerous and remarkable miracles which he relates are so many confirmations of the law that he has delivered and of the doctrine that He has published." (*Institutes*, 1.8.5)

J. Locke: "the credentials of a messenger delivering a divine religion... where the miracle is admitted, the doctrine cannot be rejected; it comes with the assurance of a divine attestation to him that allows the miracle, and he cannot question its truth" (*The Reasonableness of Christianity with A Discourse of Miracles*, ed.Ian Ramsey, p.81)

Implications:

1. Can't separate the message from the "signs" (miracles) that authenticate that the messenger. Thus, can't separate the teaching of Jesus from his activity as an exorcist, healer and worker of signs and wonders. He was not just an enlightened humanitarian.
2. The Christian faith IS a faith vindicated by miracles which did occur in time.
3. The miracle ITSELF is not alone sufficient to vindicate a message. The message itself must be consistent to prior revelations already verified by God. (Dt. 13)

8. Lest any one miss what was affirmed in section one regarding God's direction of "all," the Assembly expressly affirms God's providential ordering of several specific matters in section 4. Why did the Assembly specify these particular matters?

4. The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.

- Note especially God's active involvement "by decree" in providence, vs. passive "by bare permission" (allowing vs. decreeing)
- What purpose does this section assign to God's providence?

9. Is it mysterious that God's providence extends to "all...sins of angels and men", while it is also true that God "neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin"?

10. How does the doctrine of God's Providence relate to a practical and daily contentment according to section 5? How does this impact our perception of temptation?

5. The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption 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 sundry other just and holy ends.

WCF 5:5-7

1. According to section 5, what does God often leave his own children to?

5. The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption 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 sundry other just and holy ends.

2. What purposes are behind such leaving? Can we know certainly what God's specific purpose is for such "leaving"?

3. What does God withhold from the unregenerate in section 6? How does this define God's act of judgment and the curse? What then is the ultimate "curse" of hell in relation to this?

6. As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous Judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them he not only withholdeth his grace whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasions of sin; and, withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan, whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.

5. According to the Bible, whom does God "chasten"? See Heb. 12:4-11.

7. As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof.

6. In English, we use the word "punish" either to mean "discipline/chasten" (as in "punish a child, so the child will become a better person") or to mean "repay for wrongs done" (as in "punish a criminal"). In what sense does God "punish" believers, and in what sense does He not?

7. Biblically, what justification is there for affirming that God's providence for his church is "special", disposing all things to the good thereof?

Mt.16:18, *I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.*

Mt. 28:20, *And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

Romans 8:28, *We know that all things work together for good, for those who love God who are called according to his purpose... And those whom he predestined... he also glorified.*

Philip 1:6, *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*

1 Tim.4:10, *For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.*

Applied To Suffering

8. All of this raised the question of suffering in the world. Does the reality of suffering work against the knowledge of God? E.g. Is suffering an "ultimate" problem?

Perhaps no other issue more reveals our perspective in life than the issue of suffering and evil in the world. When you suffer, what do you try to look for in suffering? Why? What is affirmed as true?

As applied toward the belief in God:

Short Version:

1. A Perfectly good and all-powerful God would not allow evil.
2. There is evil

3. Therefore God does not exist

Unpacked Version:

1. God is by definition all-good, all-powerful and all knowing.
2. An all-good God would want to eliminate all evil
3. An all-powerful God would be able to do anything He wanted.
4. An all knowing God would know how.
5. If evil does exist, then God is either not all-good, all-powerful or all-knowing.
6. If God loses one of these attributes, He stops being God.

7. Therefore, God does not exist.

The Fundamental Assumption: Ultimate evil. (3 options)

Ultimate Evil: That evil that is utterly pointless. Evil with a good purpose ceases to be ultimate evil.

B. The Fundamental Assumption challenged:

Problem Restated:

1. If God exists, he does not allow any utterly pointless evil.
2. There is pointless evil from our perspective.

3. God does not exist.

Theo-centric Response:

1. If God exist, he does not allow any utterly pointless evil.
2. God does exist.

3. Therefore there is no utterly pointless evil.

Fundamental Perspective:

Theology interprets suffering rather than suffering interpreting Theology.
God-centered Perspective vs. Human centered perspective.

Examples in Scripture:

Romans 5:3-5

... we exalt in hope of the glory of God, and not only this, but we also exalt in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and

proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Romans 8:18-25

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was *subjected* to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope (not utterly pointless subjecting), that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in Hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

1 Peter 1:6-7:

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in the praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 12:5-11:

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline. But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons... He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain:*

Beyond all doubt, His idea of "goodness" differs from ours... By the goodness of God we mean nowadays almost exclusively His Kindness. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, "What does it matter so long as they are contented?" We want, in fact, not so much a Father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven-- a senile benevolence... Kindness, merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering. It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms... If God is Love, He is by definition, something more than mere kindness. And it appears, from all records, that though He has often rebuked us with contempt, He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense.

The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves, is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word "love" and look on things as if man were the centre of them.

The fall... to that doctrine, man is now a horror to God and to himself and a creature ill-adapted to the universe not because God made him so but because he has made himself so by the abuse of his free-will... Christianity asserts that God is good; that he made all things good and for the sake of their goodness; that one of the good things He made, namely, the free will of rational creatures, by its very nature included the

possibility of evil; and that creatures, availing themselves of this possibility, have become evil.

Westminster Shorter Catechism: God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his *being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth*

9. What is "normative" for a Christian in this present age with respect to suffering? (Not to necessarily diminish the normative aspects of God's Kingdom that is now with respect to the "tastes" of heaven now-- but even as the Kingdom of God is now present, it is present in the midst of the Kingdom of darkness which will result in the inevitable "suffering." Yet for the Christian, even this suffering is controlled by God so as to be "disciplines" rather than "punishment" for the Christian.)

In the New Covenant, the nature of our union with Christ is such that we "suffer with him, in order that we may be glorified with him." It is not exceptional, but normative, within our administration, for the outer man to be "wasting away" even as the inner man is being renewed. T. David Gordon

πασχω (suffer)

Mark 8:31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Acts 3:18 In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer.

Acts 9:16 I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Phil. 1:29 For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well--

1Th. 2:14 For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews,

2Th. 1:5 ¶ This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering.

2Tim. 1:12 and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

Heb. 5:8 Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;

1Pet. 2:19 For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. 20 If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

1Pet. 4:1 ¶ Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin),

1Pet. 4:19 Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.

1Pet. 5:10 And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

Rev. 2:10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

λυπη (noun- pain)

John 16:20 Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. 21 When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. 22 So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

Heb. 12:11 Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

1Pet. 2:19 For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.

θλιβω

2Cor. 1:6 If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering.

2Cor. 4:8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;

2Cor. 7:5 ¶ For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way--disputes without and fears within.

1Th. 3:4 In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know.

κακοπαθεω (suffer)

2Tim. 2:9 for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained.

2Tim. 4:5 As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

διωκω (persecute)

Matt. 5:10 ¶ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 5:11 ¶ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matt. 23:34 Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town,

John 15:20 Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also.

Acts 7:52 Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.

1Cor. 4:12 and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure;

2Cor. 4:9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

2Tim. 3:12 Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

From T. David Gorden's unpublished handout on Christian ethics: The consequences of the discussion are far from academic.

Is temporal prosperity conditioned upon the obedience of either individuals or nations? Was such a distinctive feature of the Sinai administration, or is it an enduring principle in the New Covenant era? Samuel Bolton's entire volume was written to address precisely the questions of obedience and the consequences thereof, temporal and eternal. He said this, for instance:

"David might well say that he never saw the righteous forsaken, nor their seed begging bread, for outward mercies were the condition annexed to their obedience and God's part in the covenant, and these failed not to them that obeyed. But whatever it was then, it is not so now. Those who are willing and obedient do not now eat the good of the land. Indeed, it may be that they are in the greatest outward trouble and necessity, whereas they who do wickedly prosper" (*True Bounds*, p. 174).

Bolton (correctly, in my judgment) had the better, and more-pauline theology. He understood that the relation between obedience and temporal prosperity was *positive* in the Sinai economy; *inverse* in the New Covenant economy. In the New Covenant, the nature of our union with Christ is such that we "suffer with him, in order that we may be glorified with him." It is not exceptional, but normative, within our administration, for the outer man to be "wasting away" even as the inner man is being renewed.

When our tradition teaches, as it so frequently does today, that there is essential continuity between the Sinai administration and the New Covenant administration on the issue of the relation between obedience and temporal prosperity, it places upon the shoulders of saints a burden which neither we nor our fathers could bear (e.g., fearing temporal sanctions as the result of disobedience). It repudiates, implicitly, the normativity of cross-bearing as an aspect of Christian discipleship. Implicitly, it repudiates the testimony of the inspired interpreters of our covenant, who perceived earthly affliction as evidence of divine favor ("Whom he loves, he chastens"). Implicitly, it repudiates the apostolic instruction that Christians who hope in Christ for this life are "of all men most to be pitied." Implicitly, it

replaces the light yoke and easy burden of Christ with the heavy yoke and unbearable burden of the Sinai administration. And implicitly, it joins the chorus of Paul's Corinthian accusers, who denigrated his apostolic authority on the ground of his many sufferings, which very sufferings the apostle presented as proof to the contrary.

Discussion: Relation of Section 2 with Biblical comfort in times of suffering.

1. Ann Bradstreet, "Verses Upon the Burning of our House" July 10th, 1666
2. Death of Lanier

Providence Applied to Christian Contentment

(See PPT slides—available on website in Confessional Theology online)

Discussion: Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*
Chapters 1-3, pp.17-73

***1 Tim. 6:6,8** Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment;... but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.

Josh. 7:7 Joshua said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Why have you brought this people across the Jordan at all, to hand us over to the Amorites so as to destroy us? Would that we had been content to settle beyond the Jordan!

2Kings 14:10 You have indeed defeated Edom, and your heart has lifted you up. Be content with your glory, and stay at home; for why should you provoke trouble so that you fall, you and Judah with you?"

2Cor. 12:10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Phil. 4:11 Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.

Heb. 13:5 Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

Stated Negatively by Burroughs in Chapter 8, "The Evils of a Murmuring Spirit"

A Confession:

Oh, had I had this grace of contentment, what a happy life I might have lived! What abundance of honour I might have brought to the name of God! How might I have honoured my profession! What a great deal of comfort I might have enjoyed! But the Lord knows it has been far otherwise. Oh, how far have I been from this grace of contentment which has been expounded to me! I have had a murmuring, a vexing, and a fretting heart within me. Every little cross has put me out of temper and out of frame. Oh, the boisterousness of my spirit! What evil God sees in the vexing and fretting of my heart, and murmuring and repining of my spirit!

1. As contentment argues much grace, and strong grace, and beautiful grace, so murmuring argues much corruption, and strong corruption, and very vile corruptions in your heart. (p.137)
2. (Jude 14-15) It is a most dreadful Scripture, that the Lord, when he speaks of ungodly ones, puts murmurers in the very forefront of all. (p.138)
3. God counts it as rebellion... (since) It is contrary to the worship that is in... (p.139)
4. It is a wickedness which is greatly contrary to grace, and especially contrary to the work of God, in bringing the soul home to himself. I know no disorder more opposite and contrary to the work of God in the conversion of a sinner, than this one. (p.141)