

GOD’S PROVIDENCE
The Privileges of the Christian Life
Westminster Presbyterian Church
October 11, 2020

“...nothing is more profitable than the knowledge of this doctrine” – John Calvin

I. Introduction: God’s Sovereign Plan

Ps 33:11 – *“The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.”*

Prov 19:21 – *“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.”*

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 . . .”*

A. Providence Defined

“God’s providence is His watchful, effective, active, ceaseless, total, detailed, personal, loving, wise, and holy governing of this world.” -Dr. David Calhoun

Q. 11. *What are God's works of providence?* A. 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. 27. *What do you mean by the providence of God?* A. The almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by his hand, he upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by his fatherly hand. (Heidelberg Catechism)

II. How God’s Providence “Works”

[I]n overruling all things, [God’s Providence] works at one time with means, at another without means, and at another against means... [N]evertheless sometimes the causes of the events are hidden... So the thought creeps in that human affairs are whirled about by the blind impulse of Fortune, or our carnal nature incites us to speak as if God were amusing himself by tossing men up and down like balls. It is true, indeed, that if we had quiet and composed minds ready to learn, the final outcome would show that God always has the best reason for his plan: either to instruct his own people in patience, or to correct their wicked affections and tame their lust, or to subjugate them to self-denial... Profane men with their absurdities foolishly raise an uproar... If the Lord has indicated the point of our death, they say, we cannot escape it. Therefore it is vain for anyone to busy himself in taking precautions... But with respect to future events, Solomon easily reconciles human deliberation with divine providence... “A man’s heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps,” (Prov 16:9). This means that the eternal decrees of God by no means prevent us from proceeding, under his will, to provide for ourselves, and arrange all our affairs.

– John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.17.1, 3–4, 6

A. According to Calvin, what are the three ways God can execute His perfect providence? What are examples of each?

Ps 104:14 – *“You cause the grass to grow for the livestock ...”*

Ps 145:15 – *“The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.”*

1 Kings 12:15 – *“So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat.”*

Hos 1:7 – *“But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God. I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen.”*

John 11:43 – *“When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’”*

- B. What error does a “hyper-Calvinistic” view of providence produce? Are we ever at fault in this way?
- C. According to Calvin, to what degree can we understand the purposes behind God’s providence? What about when we look at the big picture versus particular events? Which is clearer to us?

III. God’s (Providential!) Purpose(s) for Suffering

- A. Suffering reminds us that this life will one day give way to eternity.

Rom 8:18–19 – *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God...”*

- B. God uses suffering to refine and strengthen our faith.

1 Pet 1:6–7 – *“In this [hope of an heavenly inheritance] you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”*

“When God permits His children to go through the furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat.” (Warren Wiersbe)

- C. God uses suffering to preserve our lives.

Gen 50:20–21 – *“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. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.”*

- D. God uses suffering to discipline us and to lead us to repentance (Heb 12:7–8).
- E. God uses suffering to enable us to comfort others (2 Cor 1:3–4).
- F. God uses suffering to display his wisdom and work.

John 11:1, 4–5 – *“Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha . . . ⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’ ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”*

- G. God loves us in and by our suffering, even when we can’t see how.

Acts 2:23–24 – *“. . . this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.”*

Rom 8:28–29 – *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”*