

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 9: THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE

Lesson 28

God's Sustaining and Governing Hand

Providence Defined: Preservation, Concurrence, and Government

Key Texts: Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17; Matthew 10:29–30; Proverbs 16:33; Genesis 50:20

He Who Upholds All Things by the Word of His Power

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Series Verse
<i>"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?"</i>
Romans 11:33–34, NASB 1995

Introduction

Creation is not God's most recent act. The God who spoke the world into being in six days did not then stand back, fold His arms, and leave His creation to run on its own. The God of the Bible is not the God of deism, the watchmaker who wound the clock of the universe and departed. He is the God who upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3), in whom we live and move and exist (Acts 17:28), and who works all things after the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11). The creation does not sustain itself; it is sustained, moment by moment, by the continuous, active, sovereign care of the God who made it.

This is the doctrine of providence, and it is, in many ways, the doctrine that makes the most immediate difference in the day-to-day experience of the believer. The doctrine of the decrees concerns the eternal purposes of God; the doctrine of creation concerns the original act of bringing all things into being; but the doctrine of providence concerns what God is doing right now, in the movement of nations, in the fall of a sparrow, in the details of your life this very day. No other doctrine is more immediately relevant to the experience of suffering, uncertainty, loss, and the apparent randomness of daily events. And no other doctrine provides a firmer foundation for the kind of trusting, restful, confident faith that the New Testament calls every believer to exhibit.

This lesson examines the doctrine of providence in its classical three-part structure: preservation (God upholding all things in being), concurrence (God cooperating with the free actions of creatures), and government (God directing all things toward His appointed ends). We will examine the biblical testimony to each, explore the scope of God's providential governance, and begin to wrestle with the mystery that providence presents when it encounters the reality of evil. The full treatment of providence and suffering will be reserved for Lesson 29; in this lesson, we lay the theological foundations.

I. Providence Defined

A. The Classical Definition

The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, in its fifth chapter, provides one of the most comprehensive and carefully worded definitions of providence in the Reformed confessional tradition: "God, the good Creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom, upholds, directs, disposes, and governs all creatures 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." The Westminster Confession (5.1) uses virtually identical language.

Several elements of this definition deserve attention. First, providence is defined as a continuing activity of God, not a past act but an ongoing one. The present-tense verbs (upholds, directs, disposes, governs) signal that we are describing not what God once did but what He is constantly doing. Second, the scope is comprehensive: from the greatest

things to the least, no creature or event lies outside the sphere of divine providential governance. Third, the manner of this governance is consistent with the divine character: it is wise and holy, not arbitrary or capricious. And fourth, the ultimate aim of providence is the same as the ultimate aim of creation: the praise of the glory of God in all His perfections.

B. Providence Distinguished from Creation

It is important to distinguish providence from creation, even though the two are closely related. Creation is the act by which God brought all things into existence out of nothing. Providence is the ongoing activity by which He sustains, governs, and directs what He has created. Creation is completed; providence is continuous. Creation produced the world; providence maintains it. Without creation, the world would not exist; without providence, the created world would immediately cease to exist, for it has no inherent power to maintain itself in being.

The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 27) captures this distinction beautifully in its definition of providence: “The almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things come not by chance but by His fatherly hand.” The phrase “by His fatherly hand” is important: providence is not the cold governance of an impersonal force but the warm, personal, intentional care of a Father who knows the needs of His children and who governs all things for their ultimate good.

C. Providence Distinguished from Fate or Fatalism

Providence must also be carefully distinguished from the philosophical concept of fate or fatalism. Fatalism holds that all events are determined by impersonal forces or by a necessity from which no exceptions are possible and against which all human agency is powerless. The stoic acceptance of fate, the resignation of the will to an impersonal cosmic order that cannot be questioned or engaged, is the spirit of fatalism. And it sounds, at first hearing, something like the Christian doctrine of providence.

But the differences are profound. Providence is not the governance of an impersonal fate but the governance of a personal God, a God who has names, who speaks, who loves, who acts in history, who enters into covenant relationship with His people, and who governs all things not by blind necessity but by the free, purposeful, loving determination of His own wise and holy will. Providence does not suppress the genuine agency of human beings; it encompasses it. The providential governance of God is exercised through secondary causes, including the free choices of moral creatures, and not by overriding those choices. And providence has a goal: the glory of God and the good of His people, not the cold, indifferent satisfaction of an abstract necessity.

II. The First Element of Providence: Preservation

A. Defining Preservation

The first element of the classical doctrine of providence is preservation: God's continuous upholding of all created things in existence. The created order does not have inherent, self-sustaining existence; it was brought into being out of nothing, and nothing prevents it from returning to nothing except the continuous, active, sustaining power of the God who made it. Every moment that the universe continues to exist is a moment in which God is actively holding it in being. The creation is not an autonomous machine that runs on its own; it is a reality whose continued existence depends entirely and at every moment on the will and power of its Creator.

B. The Biblical Foundation

The biblical testimony to divine preservation is explicit and pervasive. Hebrews 1:3 describes the Son as the one who is “upholding all things by the word of His power” (NASB 1995). The present active participle (*pherōn*, “upholding” or “carrying”) is continuous, describing an ongoing activity, not a completed one. The same Son who created all things (Hebrews 1:2) is continuously upholding all things in existence.

Colossians 1:17 reinforces this with equal clarity: “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (NASB 1995). The phrase “hold together” (*sunestēken*) uses the perfect tense, indicating a state of coherence that has been established and is being maintained. The creation does not hold itself together by some inherent power; it holds together “in Him”, in the person of the eternal Son who is the sustaining ground of the coherence and continued existence of all things.

Acts 17:28 adds the most personal dimension: “for in Him we live and move and exist” (NASB 1995). Paul quotes this phrase in his Areopagus address to affirm that not only the universe at large but every individual human being exists in a continuous, moment-by-moment dependence on the God who made them. To live, to move, to exist, all of this requires the continuous upholding activity of God. Without it, there would be nothing. With it, there is everything.

Nehemiah 9:6 expresses the same truth in the language of prayer and praise: “You alone are the Lord. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before You” (NASB 1995). The God who made all things is the God who gives life to all things, continuously, actively, and without cessation.

C. The Theological Significance of Preservation

The doctrine of preservation has immediate and far-reaching theological implications. It means, first, that the creation is radically contingent: it does not exist by necessity but by the free, ongoing, active choice of God to sustain it. The universe is not self-explanatory; it requires, at every moment of its existence, the upholding power of the God who called it into being.

It means, second, that the Creator-creature distinction is not merely historical but perpetual. God does not make the creation and then step back, allowing it to exist independently. He continuously upholds it in existence, which means the creature's dependence on the Creator is not merely the dependence of origin but the dependence

of continuous existence. We are not merely made by God; we live by God. We are not merely created in His image; we exist in His hand at every moment.

And it means, third, that the continued existence of the universe is a moment-by-moment act of divine grace. God is under no obligation to continue upholding in existence a creation that has rebelled against Him. That the world continues to exist, that it does not return to the nothing from which it came, is a testimony to the patience and long-suffering of the God who sustains it while He accomplishes His redemptive purposes within it.

“...upholding all things by the word of His power.” | “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”

Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17, NASB 1995

III. The Second Element of Providence: Concurrence

A. Defining Concurrence

The second element of the classical doctrine of providence is concurrence, also called cooperation or co-operation. Concurrence is the doctrine that God cooperates with the free actions of His creatures in such a way that those actions are simultaneously and genuinely both the creature's own free acts and the expression of God's sovereign providential governance. Every creaturely action occurs within the framework of God's sovereign governance and through the power that God continuously supplies to the creature, yet without God's governance eliminating the genuine freedom and responsibility of the creature.

This doctrine navigates between two errors. On one side is the error of occasionalism, the view, associated with the Islamic philosopher Al-Ghazālī and later with some forms of Cartesian philosophy, that God is the only real cause of events in the world, and that created things have no genuine causal power of their own. On this view, when I pick up a pen, it is not really I who pick it up; God causes the pen to be where the pen is and my hand to be where my hand is, and the appearance of creaturely causation is illusory. Occasionalism preserves divine sovereignty at the cost of creaturely agency.

On the other side is the error of deistic concurrence, the view that God created the world with its causal powers and then allows those powers to operate independently, perhaps occasionally cooperating with them but not continuously and actively cooperating in every creaturely action. Deistic concurrence preserves creaturely agency at the cost of divine sovereignty.

The Reformed doctrine of concurrence steers between both errors: God genuinely cooperates in every creaturely action, providing the power by which the creature acts, governing the action according to His sovereign purposes, and yet doing so in a way that the creature's action is genuinely its own, genuinely free, genuinely responsible, and genuinely caused by the creature as a secondary cause within the framework of God's primary providential governance.

B. The Biblical Foundation

The doctrine of concurrence is embedded in several critical biblical texts. Philippians 2:12–13 is perhaps the most explicit: “work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (NASB 1995). Paul does not say, “God works and therefore you need not work.” He says, “work out your salvation... for it is God who is at work in you.” The human working and the divine working are simultaneous, mutually reinforcing, and neither cancels the other. God’s working in the believer is the reason for the believer’s working, not the substitute for it.

Acts 2:23 presents concurrence in the domain of redemptive history with its full moral weight: Christ was “delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God”, this is the divine side of concurrence, God’s sovereign providential governance of the events of the passion; and “by the hands of godless men” He was nailed to a cross and put to death, this is the human side, genuine free agency and genuine moral culpability. Both are affirmed simultaneously, without either qualifying or eliminating the other.

Genesis 50:20 provides the concurrence principle in its most pastorally comforting form: Joseph says to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (NASB 1995). The brothers’ action was genuinely free and genuinely evil, they meant evil. God’s action was simultaneously sovereign and genuinely good; He meant it for good. Two intentions, one creaturely and evil, one divine and good, concurred in a single event to produce an outcome that served both justice (the brothers’ guilt was real) and grace (God’s redemptive purpose was accomplished).

C. The Theological Significance of Concurrence

Concurrence is the doctrine that makes sense of the full texture of moral life within a world governed by a sovereign God. It is the doctrine that allows us to hold together the full weight of human moral responsibility, the reality that our choices are genuinely ours, genuinely free, and genuinely consequential, with the full weight of divine sovereignty, the reality that nothing in all of creation, including our free choices, falls outside the governance of the God who works all things after the counsel of His will.

The practical implication is that genuine human effort is never futile in a universe governed by God. God’s sovereignty does not make our choices redundant; He accomplishes His purposes through our choices, not in spite of them. The farmer who plants the seed is genuinely causing the harvest; and the God who sends the rain, who causes the seed to germinate, and who governs the seasons is simultaneously and sovereignly governing the outcome. The two causalities are real, compatible, and mutually reinforcing.

IV. The Third Element of Providence: Government

A. Defining Government

The third element of the classical doctrine of providence is government: God’s sovereign direction of all created things, nations, nature, history, human hearts, and even the actions of the wicked, toward the fulfillment of His appointed purposes. If preservation is God holding the creation in existence, and concurrence is God cooperating with creaturely actions, government is God directing all things toward His intended ends. Government is

the most comprehensive of the three elements, encompassing the whole of history and the whole of creation in its scope.

B. Government Over Nature

The biblical testimony to God's providential government over the natural order is extensive and detailed. Psalm 147:8–9 declares that God “covers the heavens with clouds, provides rain for the earth, makes grass to grow on the mountains. He gives to the beast its food, and to the young ravens which cry” (NASB 1995). The rain does not fall by impersonal meteorological processes alone; it falls because God sends it. The grass does not grow by the independent operation of soil chemistry and sunlight alone; it grows because God causes it to grow.

Matthew 6:26–30 is Jesus' own teaching on the providential governance of nature: the birds of the air are fed by the heavenly Father; the lilies of the field are clothed by God with a glory that surpasses Solomon's. The point of Jesus' argument is not merely that God made nature and then left it to run on its own, but that the God who feeds the birds and clothes the flowers is actively, personally, and continuously involved in the governance of the natural order for the care of His creatures. And if God cares so personally for birds and flowers, how much more will He care for His own people?

Proverbs 16:33 captures the providential governance of apparently random events: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord” (NASB 1995). Not even the roll of the dice falls outside the sovereign government of God. The casting of lots may appear to be the most random and indeterminate of human acts; yet the Bible affirms that even this falls within the governance of God. Nothing is left to chance in a universe governed by a God who works all things after the counsel of His will.

C. Government Over Nations and History

The providential government of God extends to the rise and fall of nations, the movements of peoples, and the sweep of history. Daniel 4:34–35 records Nebuchadnezzar's great confession after God humbled him: “For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” (NASB 1995). The most powerful ruler in the ancient world was forced to acknowledge that his power was contingent, derivative, and subject to the sovereign government of the God of Israel.

Acts 17:26 extends this to the entire scope of human history: God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation” (NASB 1995). The times of nations, when they rise, how long they last, when they fall, and the boundaries of their territories are sovereignly determined by God. History is not the product of blind forces; it is the outworking of the purposeful government of the God who rules over the nations.

Isaiah 46:9–10 presents God's government over history as the ground of His unique divinity: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done,

saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (NASB 1995). The ability to declare the end from the beginning, to know and govern all of history from its beginning to its conclusion, is one of the unique divine prerogatives, and it is grounded in God’s sovereign government over all things.

D. Government Over Human Hearts

Perhaps the most striking dimension of God’s providential government is His sovereignty over the hearts and minds of human beings. Proverbs 21:1 states: “The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes” (NASB 1995). The heart of the most powerful human being, the king, the one who answers to no human authority, is in the hand of God, directed according to His sovereign purposes as easily as a farmer directs the flow of irrigation water.

This does not mean that God coerces the king’s will or overrides the king’s genuine free agency. It means that God governs the desires, inclinations, and circumstances of the king in such a way that the king freely chooses to act in accordance with God’s purposes. This is the concurrence principle applied to the domain of human hearts: the king acts freely; God governs the outcome.

*“Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”
| “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”*

Matthew 10:29–30; Proverbs 16:33, NASB 1995

V. The Scope of Providence: Nothing Falls Outside

The scope of God’s providential governance is comprehensive, not merely in the sense that God governs the large-scale movements of history while leaving the small details to chance, but in the sense that nothing in all of creation, no matter how small or how apparently insignificant, falls outside the sphere of His active, intentional, purposeful governance.

Our Lord’s own teaching makes this comprehensiveness explicit with two examples drawn from the most apparently insignificant dimensions of daily life. The first is the sparrow: “Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matthew 10:29, NASB 1995). The sparrow was the cheapest commodity in the first-century Palestinian marketplace, two for a penny, or five for two pennies (Luke 12:6). Yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from the active, intentional governance of God. The death of a sparrow is not an event outside the scope of providence; it is a divinely governed event.

The second example is even more intimate: “But the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matthew 10:30, NASB 1995). Not merely counted, a number that would change with every strand that falls, but numbered: each hair individually catalogued by the God who governs all things. This is the comprehensiveness of providence pressed to its most personal and most intimate level. If the God who governs the rise and fall of empires also numbers the hairs on your head, then there is no event in your life, no loss,

no pain, no disappointment, no joy, no seemingly random circumstance, that falls outside the governance of the God who knows you more thoroughly than you know yourself.

The 1689 Baptist Confession expresses this comprehensiveness with characteristic precision: “neither are any thing (befalling) any of his elect by chance, but by his appointment, for their good” (1689 LBC 5.6). Nothing that touches the life of the believer is accidental. Nothing is merely unfortunate. Nothing is the product of impersonal forces operating outside the knowledge and governance of a sovereign God. Everything, from the events that shake the world to the circumstances that shape a single day, has been purposed by the God who works all things after the counsel of His will, for the good of those who love Him.

VI. The Mystery of Providence: God Governs Evil Without Authoring It

A. The Problem Stated

The most difficult dimension of the doctrine of providence, the one that generates the most intense theological controversy and the most urgent pastoral questions, is its relationship to evil. If God governs all things, including the free choices of moral creatures, then how does He govern evil without being its author? If nothing falls outside the scope of God’s providential government, then what is the relationship between God’s government and the Holocaust, the cancer ward, the child’s grave? These are not abstract philosophical puzzles; they are the questions that arise in the darkest hours of the pastor’s ministry and the believer’s experience.

The Reformed confessions are clear that God governs evil without being its author. The Westminster Confession of Faith (5.4) states: “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.”

B. The Distinction Between Efficient and Permissive Causality

The traditional Reformed distinction that guards against making God the author of sin is the distinction between efficient causality and permissive causality. God is the efficient cause of all that is good, He actively works the good in His creatures. But with respect to sin, God’s providential governance takes the form of permission: He does not actively cause the sin, but He sovereignly permits it, governs its occurrence, sets limits to it, and directs its consequences toward His holy purposes.

This is not a “bare permission”, a passive, reluctant non-interference by a God who would prefer things were otherwise. It is an active, sovereign, purposeful permission by a God who governs even the permission of evil for His own holy ends. The distinction between efficient causality and permissive causality preserves both the comprehensiveness of

divine sovereignty (God governs even evil) and the integrity of divine holiness (God is not the author or approver of sin).

C. The Cross as the Paradigm

The clearest paradigm of providence governing evil without authoring it is the cross of Christ. The crucifixion of the Son of God was the most morally heinous act in human history: the murder of the innocent, the rejection of the Lord of glory, the greatest expression of human sin and rebellion against God that the world has ever seen. And yet it was simultaneously the most glorious expression of God's sovereign grace and redemptive purpose that history has ever witnessed.

The apostles' prayer in Acts 4:27–28 holds these two truths together without apology: “both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur” (NASB 1995). Herod and Pilate and the crowds acted freely and wickedly; their actions were their own and they were morally accountable for them. And yet what they did was what God's hand and God's purpose had predestined to occur. The evil was real; the sovereignty was absolute; the sinfulness “proceeded only from the creature”; and the outcome was the redemption of the world.

This is the pattern of providence in relation to evil: not that evil is good, not that sin is somehow excused by its divine governance, not that the creature bears no responsibility for its choices. But that even the worst evil that creatures perpetrate is encompassed within the sovereign governance of a God who can and does bring the greatest good out of the worst evil, not because the evil was necessary, but because the God who governs it is wise enough, powerful enough, and good enough to accomplish His purposes even through it.

VII. The Pastoral and Doxological Significance

A. Providence as the Ground of Unshakeable Peace

The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 28) asks: “What advantage comes from acknowledging God's creation and providence?” And its answer is as pastorally rich as any sentence in the Reformed confessional tradition: “We learn that we are to be patient in adversity, grateful in the midst of blessing, and to trust our faithful God and Father for the future, assured that no creature shall separate us from His love, since all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot even move.”

Patience in adversity. Gratitude in blessing. Trust for the future. These are the pastoral fruits of the doctrine of providence, and they grow in the soil of the conviction that nothing, no circumstance, no loss, no suffering, no apparently random event, falls outside the care and governance of the God who numbers our hairs and catches the falling sparrow. The person who truly believes this has found the ground of a peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7), not the peace of someone who has been insulated from difficulty, but the peace of someone who knows that difficulty itself is within the sovereign, loving, purposeful governance of a Father who works all things together for good.

B. Providence Enables Genuine Human Effort

One of the most common and most persistent misunderstandings of the doctrine of providence is the idea that it produces passivity: if God governs all things, why should I do anything? But this misunderstands both the doctrine and the God who is its subject. God governs all things through secondary causes, including the free, genuine, effortful agency of His creatures. He accomplishes His purposes through human planning, human labor, human prayer, human witness, and human faithfulness. To refuse these means because God governs the ends is not piety; it is a failure to understand how providence works.

The farmer who plants in faith that God will send the rain is not a fatalist; he is a providentialist. The intercessor who prays believing that God governs the hearts of rulers is not wasting time; she is using the means that God has appointed for the governance of kingdoms. The evangelist who proclaims the gospel trusting that God will open hearts is not engaging in futile activity; he is the instrument through which God's providential purpose of gathering the elect is being accomplished. Providence does not eliminate human effort; it gives human effort its most ultimate and most sustainable ground.

C. Providence Enables Forgiveness and Reconciliation

The doctrine of providence has a specific and often overlooked implication for the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation. When Joseph says to his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20, NASB 1995), he is not minimizing the evil they did; he is placing it within the framework of God's sovereign providential governance in a way that makes forgiveness possible. The brothers' wickedness was real and it genuinely harmed Joseph; the providence of God was also real and it genuinely redeemed the situation. Joseph can forgive his brothers not because what they did was not evil, but because he can see that the God who governs all things has taken even this evil and worked it for good.

This is the theological foundation of genuine forgiveness: not the minimization of the wrong, not the pretense that it did not hurt, but the faith that the God who governs all things, including the wrong done to us, is wise enough and good enough to have purposes in it that we may not yet see, and that the obligation to forgive rests not on our ability to understand those purposes but on the reality of the grace that has been shown to us.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: The doctrine of providence is one of the most immediately comforting truths in all of Scripture for the new believer who is learning to trust God in an uncertain world. The God who saved you governs your life with the same sovereignty, wisdom, and love with which He has governed the history of redemption from its beginning. Not a hair falls from your head, not a sparrow falls from the sky, without His knowledge and governance. You are in the safest possible place: the care of a God who is both all-powerful and all-loving, and who has pledged Himself to work all things together for your good.

For the long-tenured saint: The doctrine of providence gives new depth to the familiar words of Romans 8:28: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for

good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (NASB 1995). All things, not some things, not most things, not the obvious blessings, but all things, including the things that have felt most like losses and most like failures. The God who has been faithful through all the years of your walk with Him has not changed; He is still governing all things for your good and His glory. Let that truth be the anchor of your soul in the seasons when the providence of God is most difficult to read.

For the one who is suffering: The doctrine of providence is not an easy word for the suffering soul, and it should never be delivered with the pastoral tone of someone who has the answers. But it is the true word: the God who sees what you are going through is not standing at a distance, watching helplessly. He is the God who governs what you are going through, who has permitted it for purposes that your grief may not yet allow you to see, and who is working even in this for your ultimate good and His ultimate glory. The cross is the proof that God does not stand aloof from the darkest darkness. He enters it. And He redeems it.

For the one who is angry at God: The doctrine of providence gives permission for the full expression of grief and protest before God, as the Psalms of lament model (Psalms 13, 22, 88) and as Job’s long argument with God demonstrates. You are not required to understand the providence of God before you are permitted to trust it. You are not required to feel peaceful before you are permitted to pray. Bring your anger, your confusion, your grief, and your protest to the God who governs all things, and trust that the God before whom the sparrow falls is present in your falling, and will not let you go.

Key Texts: *Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17; Matthew 10:29–30; Proverbs 16:33; Genesis 50:20; Acts 2:23; Philippians 2:12–13*

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Providence	God's continuous, active, sovereign governance of the created order by which He upholds all things in existence, cooperates with the free actions of His creatures, and directs all things toward His appointed ends for His own glory and the good of His people. Providence is distinguished from creation (which is completed) and is exercised through three elements: preservation, concurrence, and government.
Preservation	The first element of providence: God's continuous upholding of all created things in existence. The creation has no inherent, self-sustaining power; it is held in being at every moment by the active, continuous, sovereign power of God. Grounded in Hebrews 1:3 ("upholding all things by the word of His power"), Colossians 1:17 ("in Him all things hold together"), and Acts 17:28 ("in Him we live and move and exist").
Concurrence	The second element of providence: God's active cooperation with the free actions of His creatures, such that every creaturely action is simultaneously a genuine creaturely act (freely willed and morally responsible) and an expression of God's sovereign providential governance. Distinguished from occasionalism (God is the only real cause) and from deistic concurrence (God is uninvolved in creaturely causation). Grounded in Philippians 2:12–13; Acts 2:23; Genesis 50:20.
Government	The third element of providence: God's sovereign direction of all created things, nations, nature, history, human hearts, and the actions of the wicked, toward the fulfillment of His appointed purposes. The most comprehensive element of providence, encompassing the whole of history and every event within it. Grounded in Daniel 4:34–35; Acts 17:26; Isaiah 46:9–10; Proverbs 21:1.
Deism	The theological view that God created the world and established its natural laws, but does not actively intervene in or govern it thereafter. The deist God is the watchmaker who wound the clock and departed. Incompatible with the biblical doctrine of providence, which affirms God's continuous, active, and personal involvement in every dimension of the created order, from the fall of empires to the fall of a sparrow.
Occasionalism	The philosophical position that God is the only genuine cause of events in the world, and that created things have no real causal power of their own. Associated with Islamic philosopher Al-Ghazālī and with some Cartesian philosophers. Preserves divine sovereignty at the cost of genuine creaturely agency. Distinguished from the Reformed doctrine of concurrence, which affirms both

	God's sovereign governance and the genuine secondary causality of creatures.
Secondary Causes	The genuine causal powers and agencies that God has built into the created order and through which He accomplishes His providential purposes. Secondary causes include natural laws, creaturely instincts, human choices, and all other non-divine causal factors that operate within the world. God is the primary cause of all things; secondary causes are real, genuine, and effective, but they derive their power from and operate within the framework of God's primary providential governance.
Primary Cause	God Himself, as the ultimate and sovereign cause of all things. God is the primary cause in the sense that His will and power are the ultimate ground of every event that occurs. Secondary causes operate within the framework of God's primary causality and derive their causal power from Him. The distinction between primary and secondary causality is the theological tool by which the Reformed tradition affirms both God's comprehensive sovereignty and the genuine reality of creaturely agency.
Permissive Will	God's sovereign act of permitting evil to occur, as distinct from His efficient causality of good. God does not cause evil in the same sense that He causes good; He permits evil, governs its occurrence, sets limits to it, and directs its consequences toward His holy purposes. This is not a "bare permission" (passive non-interference) but an active, sovereign, purposeful permission that encompasses the evil within the framework of God's providential governance without making God the author or approver of the evil.
Common Grace	God's undeserved beneficence extended to all human beings, including the unregenerate, through the providential governance of creation: the sending of rain on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45), the restraint of human wickedness from its full potential, the preservation of social order, the provision of food and shelter, the capacity for reason and beauty, and all other blessings shared by all human beings regardless of their spiritual state. Distinct from saving grace, which is reserved for the elect.
General Providence	God's providential governance of the created order as a whole, His sustaining of nature, His governance of nations, His oversight of history, extending to all creatures and all events without distinction. Distinguished from special providence, which refers to God's particular care for His own people, directing the details of their lives specifically for their good and His glory.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that God is actively, continuously, and comprehensively involved in the governance of all that exists, not as a distant supervisor who occasionally intervenes but as the One in whom we live and move and exist (Acts 17:28), whose governing hand is present in every event from the greatest to the least. This belief is not optional for the Christian; it is the theological foundation of every other act of trust, prayer, and surrender that the Christian life requires.

We must believe, equally, that God's comprehensive governance does not eliminate creaturely agency or creaturely responsibility. Human choices are real; human effort is genuinely effective; human prayer genuinely makes a difference in the governance of God. This is not a tension to be resolved but a mystery to be received, the mystery of a God who governs all things in such a way that His governance is accomplished through, not instead of, the genuine free agency of His creatures.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the doctrine of providence produce peace. Not the false peace of someone who has denied the reality of suffering, but the genuine peace of someone who knows that the God who governs the universe also governs the details of their specific life, that the same sovereign hand that upholds the stars in their courses also upholds the believer through every valley of shadow. This is the peace that Paul promises "will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7, NASB 1995), a peace grounded not in favorable circumstances but in the character and governance of the God who transcends all circumstances.

Desire the growth of faith that the doctrine of providence is meant to produce. The Heidelberg Catechism identifies patience in adversity, gratitude in blessing, and trust for the future as the fruits of grasping providence. These are not natural virtues; they are supernatural ones, given by the Spirit to those who have genuinely received the doctrine of providence not merely as a theological proposition but as a living conviction about the character of the God they are trusting with their lives.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Pray with confidence in the God who governs all things. The doctrine of providence is the theological ground of confident, expectant prayer. You are not sending your requests into the void; you are bringing them to the God who governs the hearts of kings, who numbers your hairs, and who has promised to work all things together for good. Pray accordingly.
- Work diligently, knowing that God accomplishes His purposes through your efforts. The doctrine of concurrence means that your work genuinely matters, not as an alternative to God's governance but as the means through which He governs. Do your work faithfully, prayerfully, and with the full force of the gifts God has given you, trusting that the sovereign God who appointed the end has also appointed the means.

- Receive both blessings and sufferings from the hand of God. Job's question, "Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" (Job 2:10, NASB 1995), is the question of a man who has grasped the doctrine of providence. Both blessings and sufferings come from the same sovereign, loving hand. Receive both as from God, with gratitude for the blessings and with trust for the sufferings.
- Forgive those who have wronged you in light of the providence of God. Joseph's ability to forgive his brothers was grounded in his conviction that God had governed even their wickedness for His good purposes. Let the doctrine of providence give you the theological resources for the most difficult acts of forgiveness in your life: not by minimizing the wrong, but by trusting the God who governs all things to work even this for good.
- Find your anchor in the unchanging character of the God who governs all things. When the providence of God is most difficult to read, when suffering is most acute, when loss is most devastating, when circumstances are most confusing, return to the character of the God who governs them: His wisdom, His goodness, His faithfulness, His love. He has not changed. He has not lost control. He has not forgotten. And He has not stopped working all things together for the good of those who love Him.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. How do you typically respond when things go wrong in your life, when plans fail, circumstances deteriorate, or people let you down? Do you instinctively reach for the doctrine of providence as an anchor? Or does it remain an abstract theological concept that does not immediately shape your emotional response? Be honest.

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Hebrews 1:1–3. What does verse 3 tell us about the Son’s ongoing relationship to the created order? What is the significance of the present active participle “upholding”? How does this passage connect the Son’s role in creation with His role in providence?

3. Read Matthew 10:26–31. In what context does Jesus teach about sparrows and hairs? What is the practical conclusion He draws in verses 30–31? How does the comprehensiveness of divine providence function as comfort in a context of potential persecution?

4. Read Genesis 50:15–21. What were the brothers afraid of after Jacob’s death (v. 15)? How does Joseph’s response in verse 20 express the doctrine of concurrence? What two intentions does Joseph identify in the single event of his being sold into slavery?

5. Read Philippians 2:12–13. How does Paul hold together human effort (“work out your salvation”) and divine governance (“God who is at work in you”)? Does the divine working in verse 13 eliminate the human working in verse 12? How does this passage model the doctrine of concurrence?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

6. Explain the three elements of providence, preservation, concurrence, and government, in your own words. How do these three elements relate to one another? Which do you find most difficult to grasp conceptually, and why?

7. How does the doctrine of providence differ from the philosophical concept of fate or fatalism? What are the specific features of the Christian doctrine that distinguish it from a cold, impersonal determinism? Why is this distinction pastorally important?

8. Explain the Reformed distinction between God’s efficient causality of good and His permissive causality of evil. How does this distinction guard against making God the author of sin while preserving the comprehensiveness of His sovereign governance? Is this distinction persuasive to you? What objections might someone raise against it?

9. Proverbs 16:33 says “the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” How does this passage establish the scope of divine providence? What are the implications for the way we make decisions, for the way we understand “bad luck,” and for the way we think about randomness and chance?

10. The 1689 Confession states that nothing befalls the elect “by chance, but by His appointment, for their good.” How does this confession shape the way the believer should relate to the full range of life’s circumstances, both the pleasant and the painful? What specifically does it mean to say that painful circumstances are appointed “for their good”?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

11. The Heidelberg Catechism identifies patience in adversity, gratitude in blessing, and trust for the future as the practical fruits of the doctrine of providence. Honestly assess your own life in light of these three: which comes most naturally to you? Which is most underdeveloped? What does this tell you about the extent to which you have genuinely internalized the doctrine of providence?

12. The lesson argues that the doctrine of providence enables genuine forgiveness by placing wrongs done to us within the framework of God’s sovereign governance. Is there a relationship in your life where forgiveness has been most difficult? How might Joseph’s example in Genesis 50:20 provide theological resources for that specific situation? What would it look like to say, with Joseph, “God meant it for good” about what was done to you?

13. The doctrine of providence is sometimes misused to produce passivity: “God is in control, so I don’t need to pray/work/act.” How would you respond to this misuse? What is the biblical relationship between God’s governance of all things and the urgency of human prayer, effort, and faithfulness?

14. The lesson introduces the mystery of providence in relation to evil, a topic that will be developed more fully in Lesson 29. At this point in your study, how do you hold together the reality of God’s comprehensive providential governance with the reality of evil and suffering? What questions does the doctrine of providence raise for you that you most want addressed in Lesson 29?

Prayer Focus

Open your time of prayer by reading Psalm 46 together, the great providence Psalm: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea” (Psalm 46:1–2, NASB 1995). Let the image of the mountains slipping into the sea, the most catastrophic disruption of the natural order imaginable, press upon you the scope of the faith this Psalm calls for. And let the declaration “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold” (v. 7, 11, NASB 1995) be the declaration of your own heart.

Pray specifically with gratitude for the ways in which God’s providence has been evident in your life, the circumstances that seemed random or difficult at the time but that you can now see were governed by a wise and loving hand. Bring before God the specific circumstances in your life and in the lives of your group members that feel most uncertain, most painful, or most confusing. Ask for the faith to trust the God who governs even these, for the wisdom to act faithfully within them, and for the patience to wait for the purposes of God to become clear.

Close with the words of Romans 8:28, spoken together as a corporate confession of faith: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (NASB 1995). Let that word “know” bear its full weight, not “we hope,” not “we suspect,” not “we trust,” but “we know.” The ground of that knowledge is the character and the providence of the God who has called you according to His eternal purpose, and who has never once left a single detail of your life outside the care of His governing hand.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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