

Lesson 38: Chapter: 5: Paragraph: 1: God the Sustainer of all Things

OUTLINE

Why we need the doctrine
Asserting the doctrine

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Today we come to a very neglected yet necessary doctrine, the doctrine of the providence of God. Every Christian in the West at least is in need of learning what the Bible says about God as the sustainer of His Creation. If you live Post-Enlightenment; if you have partaken of the contemporary school curriculums and their view of how the universe runs; if you have watched any science or nature program that has to do with how the universe began or how the earth and its various parts function; if you live in the age of present medical advances where there is the expectation of a pill or a treatment for every ailment; if you live in an age where you watch the weather every day to see what the weather will be tomorrow; if you have studied any course at University that has spoken about setting science and learning free from the captivity of the Church through things like the Copernican revolution; these are the common ideas those in the West have been exposed to. If this is your experience then without realizing it you have been indoctrinated into a view of God's interaction with His world that falls way short of what the Bible presents. You will know that the supernatural is frowned upon and God has been pushed out of His world. Even Christians have capitulated to this pressure and believe in a God of the gaps. Everywhere where science is still unable to give a natural explanation there God is allowed to be God—until science can explain Him away increasingly denying Him rule in His universe.

The doctrine of Providence is not only important because of the ubiquitous scientism that we have all imbibed. This doctrine answers a number of fundamental questions that worry us regularly. Is God in control? How is God active in my life? Do miracles happen? If God is sovereign over all things do I have to do anything, like prayer or evangelism? How can I disobey God if His will always comes to pass? How does human responsibility square with God's control of all things including sin? Is God ruling when sin prospers? Does this make Him the author of sin? Is God in control and His will coming to pass when I suffer?

Maybe you are someone who does not concern themselves with involved philosophical questions, and that is fine, then here are some sinful ways of living that deny the providence of God, to help you see its relevance. There are three ways we can live like atheists who deny the biblical teaching of the doctrine. Do you live with worry and anxiety? Are you perplexed and fearful of the future because of the rise in evil; the ways in which governments are casting off civil liberties; the ways our children are being targeted? Do you fear for the economy; do you fret about making more money; are you paralyzed and indecisive when it comes to making choices about your future; are you considering radical action that will separate you from the church as you go off grid to be self-sufficient? This anxiety and worry is a sign that you are not thinking deeply enough about the Bible's teaching on the providence of God. In Matt. 6:25-34 we see Jesus using this doctrine of a Loving Father who is in control of all things willing to provide for His children, for this reason we are not to worry, and are set free to pursue God's interests not the concerns of those

who do not know God. V30-33, 'But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.'

James 4:13-17, 'Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.' Here we see an attitude of presumption that leads to prayerlessness and no consideration of God's will when making life decisions. To think that the future depends only on your power and plans, to live without regard to God's will and power, the modern world lives in this way and many Christians do too. This is why we need to learn the doctrine of providence.

Another God denying attitude is fatalism. Some go to the opposite extreme of acknowledging God's control in all things. It becomes an excuse for them to do nothing, to deny the commands to pray, be holy, work hard, etc. This denial of providence neglects the daily duties that God lays upon us.

Anxiety denies God's power and concern taught in providence; presumption denies God's involvement taught in providence; fatalism denies God's commandments and our duties taught in providence.

Excuse my long introduction to this chapter and the detailed way in which I have tried to argue for its importance already rushing to apply the doctrine. I cannot stress how important I think this doctrine is and how much it can build up our faith.

Lets remind ourselves then of the flow of thought that gets us to this chapter in the 1689. The 1689 begins with Scripture; this is the means by which God reveals Himself. Following the doctrine of scripture then is the doctrine of God, as Trinity. God has a plan for all things before He creates so the chapter on the decree precedes the doctrine of creation. We have finished looking at the doctrine of Creation, and now we continue to look logically at how God rules and sustains His creation. Where the Decree is the plan of God; Providence is the bringing of God's plan to pass. This chapter has 7 paragraphs. Paragraph 1 gives a general overview statement of the doctrine asserting the sovereign sustaining by God of all things. This raises the question of how God can do this without being the author of sin, and so paragraph 2 puts forward an explanation of how God does this by means. Paragraph 3 then adds the idea that God is also able to work by miracles not only by means. Paragraphs 4-6 deal with the trickier matters of God's sovereignty over the first sin, sin the life of the believer, and the unbeliever. Paragraph 7 ends the chapter with an emphasis on the church being a central concern of God's providence showing the assurance that we can gain from this doctrine.

Asserting the doctrine

Paragraph 1: 'God the good Creator of all things, in his infinite power and wisdom doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, to the end for the which they were created, according unto his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will; to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.'

Who is the governor of all things? "God the good Creator of all things". The God of the Scriptures who we have looked at already in the confession is the God who is governor. **From what resources does He govern?** "in His infinite power and wisdom". Please note the reference to God having all that is needed to oversee His creation in the areas of knowledge and power. It is infinite power and wisdom and not merely knowledge that He uses. Implying there will be no task too hard, no problem unsolvable, and no knowledge lacking. God is at rest as He rules His creation; He does not find things hard or anything that can overthrow His plan, Ps. 135:6, 'Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.' Dan. 4:35, 'all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"'

What actions make up His role in sustaining His creation? "...doth uphold, direct, dispose and govern". This would be the confessions attempt to say that everything that is needed that would make up the ongoing sustaining and existence of anything is covered by God's providential activity. Heb. 1:3 reveals the Trinitarian doctrine in this upholding, that the Father does it through the Son, 'He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.' Another proof-text from the confession is Job 38:11, 'and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed.'

Over what does He exercise His providence? "all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least". This encompasses all animate and inanimate objects, 'creatures' would mean all of humanity, the devil and demons, and all animals, insect, and bacterial life, etc. And 'things' would indicate anything be it atoms, water, wind, earthquakes, etc. Generally speaking the Bible teaches us that all things that happen, happen according to God's purpose, a purpose that is not informed or compelled by anything outside of Himself and His own good purposes. Ephes. 1:11 (ESV) "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him *who works all things according to the counsel of his will*". Everything that happens is part of His purpose and plan, otherwise known as His decree; and this decree is brought to pass perfectly in what we call God's providence. Firstly, the tiniest events in this world are attributed to God's will, Matthew 10:29 (ESV) "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father." Apparently random things like the rolling of a dice are part of His purposes, Proverbs 16:33 (ESV) "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." Unexpectedly, even decisions that seem to be free are planned by God, Proverbs 19:21, 'Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.' Proverbs 21:1 (ESV) "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." Those things science claims to explain by natural causes, like lightning, are said to be under His control, Job 36:32 (ESV) "He covers his hands with the lightning and commands it to strike the mark." There is no area that His sovereignty does not reign over. There is nothing that comes to pass that He

has not ordained. And nothing that He is not upholding, steering, causing, ruling over, etc.

By what principles does God act? “by His most wise and holy providence”. There is no wiser plan than the one God is executing in His providence, and there is no sin in all that God does in sustaining and guiding the existence of all things. There can be no better or more moral plan than God’s.

What are the determining causes behind God’s providence? “His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will”. We have stated this before but the meaning of foreknowledge here is not the Arminian one where God looks into the future to learn about what may or may not happen; this is the plan of God from eternity that concerns itself with all things. Is. 46:10-11 demonstrates that God makes a plan and then executes it in His providence, ‘declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.’

For what purpose does God govern? “to the end for which they were created, ...to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness and mercy” God works all things according to the predetermined purpose He gives things, for the ultimate purpose of glorifying His own name. We can add to this that this includes the good of all those who love Him. He is glorified in the good He does to His people.

So this is the doctrine stated. Like the doctrine of God’s decree we see that the God of the Bible who is all powerful, who is the Creator of all things, and who cannot be resisted does His work without denying Himself. And as with the doctrine of the Decree there are a number of questions that arise. In an age of science which thinks it has explained in purely natural terms why things have happened the question of whether God is truly sustaining all things is questioned. On top of that the idea of miracles which would have been more natural to believe before the modern age also raises difficult questions. Philosophically the idea that God rules His creation perfectly and irresistibly, and yet it includes sin, the devil and human suffering raises questions around God’s competence, whether He is really ruling, and the problem of human responsibility and freedom. The confession will go on to address these matters but we must first appreciate how radical the biblical view of God ruling His universe really is. Do we as believers truly hold to the biblical teaching or not?