

Lesson 39: Chapter 5: Paragraph 2-3: How God's Providence Works

OUTLINE

Ordinary means

Extraordinary means

INTRODUCTION

Last week we put forward the biblical teaching *that* God sustains all things; that there is nothing that can happen that is not in some way part of God's will and in some way upheld by His power. That God is acting in history to bring His eternal plan to pass perfectly. We recognized that this biblical view of things raises a number of questions. The 1689 goes on in chapters 2-3 to answer some of the *how* of these matters.

Before we dig in I want to begin with an important reminder: The Bible is the authority by which we hold to this and many other mysterious doctrines. Every single doctrine in the Bible will have its difficulties, will have a point at which it states things that are beyond our ability to verify as creatures; that will have some part that seems to contradict our experience; that seems illogical according to the normal way in which things work; that even seems an impossible contradiction. Name any doctrine and I will show you that there are difficulties with it. Friends, this is why we need the bible. The Bible is God's word to us where He tells us things that we could not know for ourselves. It is the final authority for what we believe and how we act because it is the Word of God. If it is a choice between science and the bible, philosophy and the bible, logic and the bible, my opinion and the bible, the bible is God's word and must be believed. We believe that God is one in nature and three in person, even though experience teaches us that there is only one person per being, because the Bible teaches it. We believe that Jesus is fully God and fully man though we think that this would usually be at the expense of some aspect of one or either nature. I need to remind us of our method of deriving doctrine especially as we proceed into the mysterious yet glorious doctrine of God's providence. We have been confronted with some difficult statements: God is in control over all things—and moral creatures are making free decisions; God is in control of all things, including evil—and yet is not the author of sin; God is upholding all things, they cannot exist apart from His upholding—things work according to their own nature and can be reliably and repeatedly used by God's creatures; etc. Our warrant for believing these difficulties is not because we are committed to a certain philosophy, but because the Scriptures properly understood demand that we believe both sides of these difficulties without one cancelling out the other. We trust that God has revealed enough for us to see both sides, but not enough for us to answer all the difficulties and questions that arise. We however accept things on the basis of the authority of God's word not the authority of human reason.

Paragraphs 2 and 3 follow a main division in understanding God's ways of working out His providence. There are ordinary means, paragraph 2; and extraordinary means, paragraph 3.

Ordinary means

‘Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; so that there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without his providence; yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.’

The word ‘ordinary’ has several meanings. It means the usual or customary way in which God works in the world. And this is part of what we mean when we say that God works out His providence by ordinary means. So healing comes from the body doing its job aided by medicines and treatments. This is the usual way in which God’s goodness to us works itself out. But there is also an older use of the word ordinary that informs what we mean here. James Renihan tells us that the word ‘ordinary’ also means in accordance with rules. The word ordinance points us in this direction. In other words, the confession recognizes what some have called the ‘laws of nature’ as part of God’s usual way of working. So things like the law of gravity and other predictable patterns found in creation are part of God’s providential working. This assertion is found in the opening remarks of paragraph 3, ‘God, in his ordinary providence maketh use of means.’

Paragraph 2 speaks about first and second causes to point us to God’s ordinary way of working. It begins with a summary of what the doctrine of God’s Decree and paragraph 1 of this chapter have stated so far, ‘Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; so that there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without his providence.’ There is nothing here that we have not already established from scripture. God is the first cause of all things; God has decreed according to a perfect plan what will be; God’s providence is now the immutable—unchangeable; and infallible—without error outworking of that plan; there is nothing that happens that is not according to God’s will; there is no such thing as chance or luck. Prov. 16:33, ‘The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.’

The execution of God’s will is such that God’s plan comes off perfectly, as He planned it, first time. He needs no repeats, retries, or back up plans. However, God does not act to bring all things to pass in the same way, He also uses second causes, “yet by the same providence He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently”. Firstly, we can see here the distinction between first and second causes. God may be the primary cause of all things, but not the proximate cause. He may be the One who gets the ball rolling, but not the last one to get the ball into the goal. Yet we are told that God has a plan that includes all things that happen, ‘He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes’. God’s sovereignty over how things happen is explained by these secondary causes. Paragraphs 4-6 will explore more deeply how God’s permissive will is involved in being sovereign over free creatures and their moral decisions. But here the confession is affirming that through things that appear natural God is at work sustaining His world. Renihan shows how the simple act of saying grace is an acknowledgement of this fact: “Every day, Christians express their commitment to this doctrine. When you bow your head to pray before a meal, you thank God for the food He provided for you. This is an acknowledgement that the good things we enjoy, such as our daily bread, come to us from God. He is the first cause as He upholds, disposes, directs, and governs his creatures and their actions. And yet we know that the food before us does not miraculously appear. It is rather the result of a long series of creaturely actions, beginning with a seed

planted in the ground, growth through watering and the nourishment of the soil, harvesting, transportation, and so forth. The delicious salad you enjoy comes to you through many steps, and usually involves many people to bring it to you. And yet you thank God as if He directly provided it to you. And in reality, He did in providence, decreeing in eternity that those plants would produce for your nourishment, upholding their vitality and growth in this world, and sustaining everyone involved in bringing them to you. He used each person and everything involved in the planting, nourishment, harvesting, and delivery of that food to you. It is quite appropriate to thank Him for the food, while recognizing that the Lord uses providential means to accomplish His decree.”¹

As Martin Luther put it we should see God hiding His blinding majesty behind His kindness in providence, that the milkmaid and the baker are the ‘masks’ of God in answering our prayer for daily provision. As 21st century people we will have to think a little harder as the baker is no longer the man we get our bread from, but we go to the shops who have a baker who works for them, but their organisation is a faceless corporation. However, God’s providence and kindness is exercised as much in the multicorporational, market driven, international economy as in the medieval bakery. He is in every tick and tock, upholding and guiding it at every moment. The multifaceted nature of our daily provision does not even challenge His omniscience, nor the apparently constantly shifting values of the market exercise His power. The simplicity of God’s providence does not need to be reviewed in the light of the world of 7 billion people and its multiplying need. Our lives are not lost to His view as He hopelessly tries to juggle the world’s economy. No He is aware of our needs, and He is able to provide exactly what we need, when we need it. When we prosper it is by His hand, and we need to praise Him, and not grow callous. And when we are poor, it is not because He is weak and losing the war, He has ordained it as such, and we should be content in whatever situation we find ourselves in.

The confession talks about second causes under three categories, ‘necessarily, freely, or contingently.’ These cover the three main ways God’s providence is at work in the world. Necessarily refers to those things that work by law, like gravity. God upholds the predictability of the four seasons, Gen. 8:22, ‘While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.’ God provides the sustenance the animal world needs by things like rain and growth, Ps. 145:15-16, ‘The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.’ The predictability of things like the seasons; the water cycle; the weather; and the many other things that scientists have been able to study because of their regularity is merely one of the ways God is working in His world. We are not able to penetrate beneath all the layers of mediation to the point at which we see His power feeding into His creation, but the Scriptures help us to see that He is at work there. Science cannot keep God out of His world simply because it cannot penetrate to seeing how He works, the Scriptures affirm that He is. The only reason science is able to exist is because God gives a predictability to His world through things that work necessarily.

The next way in which God’s providence is described is the adverb, ‘freely.’ This concerns itself with the way in which God governs moral creatures. Be they angelic or human; the devil or Adam, God does not violate the will of the

¹ Confessing the Faith: Volume 2: The Second London Confession by James Renihan
<https://a.co/f37yfD0>

creature, they act 'freely.' We will return to this point in paragraphs 4-6 but here at least we can state that God is sovereign while man is free. In theology this is known as *concursum/concurrence*. It is not a case of either God acting and willing or man acting and willing, but both God and man acting and willing. There are various scriptural proofs for this concurrent action. Gen. 50:20, '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.' Phil. 2:12-13, 'Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.' 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.' The will of human beings are not coerced, but make free choices out of their own capacities. Whether in salvation, in obedience, or in sin, God does not coerce the will, overriding it with His own, the will of the creature is always free and always their own. Yet the scripture affirms that even with this freedom no matter what the creature freely decides all is under the umbrella of God's sovereignty. The knotty question of God being the author of sin is one we will untie in future lessons.

Contingently is the third adverb. Contingency is a technical word that means the possibility to be otherwise. The opposite of contingency is necessity; if something is necessary it cannot be otherwise. For example, it is necessary given who God is that God cannot sin. There is no contingency on this matter given the nature of who God is as God. Created things on the other hand are contingent by nature and have the potential for change, moral creatures have the potential to sin, living creatures have the potential to die; they are by definition contingent. Now we must appreciate that the confession is making what appears to be a counterintuitive move. You see if God wills something and it must come to pass, that thing is necessary. It would seem a contradiction to say that things can be contingent if God has an eternal will concerning them. But this is what the confession is willing to do. It is willing to sustain that all things are necessary because God has willed them; but God has not violated the nature of things so that they become robots or are denied being what they are, their contingency is upheld. For example, we know the prophecy in John 19:36 that none of Christ's bones will be broken, just like the Passover lamb. From the point of view of God's will it is impossible that God's will cannot be done, it is impossible that Christ's bones could be broken, for God's will cannot be resisted. Yet on the other hand it is not by denying the fragility of the bones that this is done; the bones are still technically breakable, they still have the nature of human bones, we cannot deny the human nature of Christ in this, they still have the potential to be broken, they have contingency. God has not changed the nature of the bones; He has not denied their contingency. Even in the miracle where God causes an axe head to float it is not by changing the nature of the axe head, it retained its nature; God just did a miracle without violating its nature.

Extraordinary means