

## CHAPTER 8.

### OUR FATHER AND HIS PROVIDENCE

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Our heavenly Father, who created all things, also takes care of them all. Every day again he makes sure that the entire universe keeps running. As if that were not enough, in addition to maintaining it all, he governs the affairs of all his creatures so that ultimately they serve his plan and purposes. In one word we call this God's *providence*.

Now, the interesting and at times perplexing truth is that we often respond differently to God's creation as compared to his providence. The same heavenly Father is responsible for both, yet our reactions to his works can be quite dissimilar. For example, we see the delightfully delicate petals of a vibrantly colourful flower and we praise our Father for it. We tickle a baby, listening for the gleeful giggles that erupt from his little lungs, and we are amazed at how the Father has designed human beings. When we behold the vast beauty and intricate precision with which our Father made all the stars in the galaxies, we respond with awe and wonder.

Yet when we analyze the same Father's work of providence, especially how he governs the affairs of our lives, we often react in a different manner. We have many questions. A child who is nine years old may die of cancer, but the child's great-grandmother who is ninety years old continues to live. Why, Lord? Floods and tornados destroy homes and businesses; they also kill men, women, and children. Why, Lord? Drought cuts the harvest in half, when the economy is already suffering. Why,

Lord? Concerning God's providence we have many questions and also a few doubts. We might even be tempted to think that if only we, human beings, were in charge, then we would govern things in a better and more prosperous way. But it is precisely for this reason that we must hold the doctrines of creation and providence together and remember that the same wise and loving Father is responsible for both.

To be sure, there is an important difference between creation and providence. Creation took place in the first week of world history and it was finished after that (Heb 4:3, 4). By contrast, our Father's work of providence is ongoing. Every day again, he maintains what he made. Yet, without denying this difference, we must also be careful to hold the doctrines of creation and providence closely together. In fact, God himself already reveals this connection in the first two verses of the Bible. Genesis 1:1 speaks of the doctrine of creation: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." At the same time, we read in Genesis 1:2 that "the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." This teaches us about providence. The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters to take care of them, even as an adult eagle might hover over its young eaglets, carefully watching over them as they learn to fly (compare Gen 1:2 with Deut 32:10, 11). So we can say that God's work of providence began already on the very first day. Providence started before creation was finished.

The Heidelberg Catechism also maintains a close link between creation and providence. For example, Lord's Day 9 is about God the Father our Creator. Yet right in the middle of Answer 26 about creation we read that God "still upholds and governs [all things] by his eternal counsel and providence." Similarly, even though Lord's Day 10 is about God's providence, Question 28 asks, "What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by his providence?" With this in mind let us explore further the doctrine of providence and the deep comfort that is part and parcel of it.

## OUR FATHER IS THE PROVIDER

The Word of God assures us that the heavenly Father provides his children with many good things. The most well-known passage that gives this assurance is Matthew 6:25–34. There Jesus Christ builds a simple but powerful argument. In the first place he points to the birds. These winged creatures do not keep a large Tupperware container full of food in their nests, do they? And yet every day they have food to eat. Who feeds them? Jesus Christ answers, “Your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matt 6:26).

Two things are noteworthy in this answer. First, Jesus Christ points to *the Father* as the provider. Second, he does not say “their Father,” referring to the birds, or “my Father,” speaking of himself, but rather “*your* Father,” indicating that the Father focuses on the needs of those who trust in him. Actually Christ makes this explicit as he continues, “Are you not of more value than they?” In other words, surely the Father takes care of his own children before tending to all the other responsibilities he may have. He then repeats the same kind of argument, only this time he uses the example of wild lilies. So, the next time you begin to worry about this or that, have a look for a bird or take a glance at a flower. Just as the heavenly Father is taking care of them, so he will certainly take care of you, too, according to your needs (Matt 6:31–33).

Similarly, the apostle James reminds us, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17). Now, without a doubt, if our Father always and only gave us good and perfect gifts, then there would be fewer questions in our minds and less doubt in our hearts. Wouldn’t you agree that providence would be a much easier doctrine to comprehend if there were no such thing as suffering or sickness? But as we all know, there are also many difficult things that happen in this world. These adversities happen to unbelievers, but they happen to believers as well.

Do difficult and painful things come from exactly the same hand as the good and perfect things? At times this seems hard to accept. However, according to Lord's Day 10 both rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, health and sickness, riches and poverty, come to us, not by chance, but by his fatherly hand. This raises an urgent question, however. A loving earthly father would never want to give his child sickness or poverty. In fact, he would do everything within his power to prevent his child from going through those hardships. So how can it be that the loving heavenly Father at times does give sickness, poverty, or other difficulties to his children? Doesn't this seem to go directly against the grain of what it means to be a father?

When we discuss the doctrine of providence, it is very tempting to let our minds run away and rapidly reach all kinds of logical conclusions. For example, it might be tempting to conclude that if the heavenly Father gives one of his very own children a sickness, then obviously he is not a very loving Father. But we need to restrain our eager minds and redirect them toward God's revelation.

A good place to start is Hebrews 12. It is clear that the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were going through hard times. In verse 4 we read, "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." In other words, they were not martyrs (yet), but they had endured other forms of persecution such as insults and imprisonment (Heb 10:32–34). Still, the Holy Spirit says that the fatherly hand of God has been involved in all of this as well. He continues by saying, "It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? . . . Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?" (Heb 12:7, 9). The point is this: hardships are never pleasant, and some are extremely painful; however, in the end, they can still serve a good purpose. As God's Word says, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:11).

Our heavenly Father can give hard things to his children and remain loving. However, in order for us to understand this, we need to focus on what our suffering can produce over time, not just on how painful it is at the moment. In fact, the apostle Paul even goes so far as to say that we can even rejoice in them, “knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:3–4; also see Jas 1:2–4). Undoubtedly we can all agree that these words are easy to read but hard to apply.

Still, our heavenly Father’s perspective is always so much broader and farther than our limited insight. From his hand we may receive a sickness in our bodies. This frustrates us, but our Father may well be teaching us patience and trust in him. In other words, he is focusing on the health of our soul at the very same time that our minds are occupied with sickness of our body. It may also be the case that the Father puts us through an aggravating and disappointing time in our life. Through it he builds perseverance and character in us (Rom 5:4). In addition, since he knows the future, our heavenly Father may well be preparing us for a later time in our life when there will be an even greater difficulty to face, and we will need that perseverance and character which he cultivated in us earlier on. Alternatively, he may give us a bitter hardship so that through the trial fellow believers learn to pray for the one who suffers, to help him, and to think less about themselves and more about those in need. Finally, in adverse times our God often gives us prime opportunities to evangelize and testify about the light of God’s grace in the darkness of life’s valleys. These are but a few examples of how the broad and long-term vision of the Father does work, in love, for the good of his children.

Still, all believers find it hard at times to trust wholeheartedly that “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Rom 8:28). Some things? Yes. Most things? Perhaps. But *all* things? That is hard to believe. However, the antidote to this doubt is no one less, and no one else, than the Saviour Jesus Christ himself. Those chosen to be God’s children are God’s children only for the sake of Christ (LD 13). This also

means that when the Father looks at his adopted children, he looks at them through his eternal Son, Jesus Christ.

Would the eternal Father work for the ill or demise of those who belong to his much beloved Son? Of course not! Indeed, the apostle Paul phrases it even more strongly than that: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32). Therefore, “I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39). In short, since believers belong to Christ, and since the Father loves his only-begotten Son, believers can also be assured that God the Father loves them, and that nothing can take the Father’s love away from them.

#### GOD IS ALMIGHTY BUT NOT THE AUTHOR OF SIN

In a sense we have already dealt with this topic in chapter 5 when we considered the perfections of God, which included his almighty sovereignty. But it is good to expand on this briefly. A false teaching called *deism* promotes the idea that once God was finished with creation, he pulled back and became something like a heavenly spectator who only watches the show below. Scripture teaches differently. Our Father is sovereign over all the inanimate parts of creation, such as the weather patterns (Job 38:22–30, 34–38) and the star constellations (Job 38:31–33). He rules over all the different kinds of animals (Job 39:1–30). He is the supreme Governor over all nations, from Chile right through to Cambodia and beyond (Ps 99:1–3). He also rules over the invisible realm, over both the angels who serve him willingly (Ps 103:20–21) and the demons who rebel against him (Luke 10:17). Even Satan ultimately has no choice but to submit to God’s decrees (Job 2:6–7; Rev 12:9, 12).

The scope of God’s providence extends to the small and seemingly insignificant details of life as well. If a hair falls from your head, or a little sparrow dies, it does not happen randomly; instead, these events are planned by God (Matt 10:29–30; Luke 21:18). This all-inclusive

providence gives us an immense security and stability in life since, as explained above, Romans 8 assures us that nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love. However, there are also those who see a negative side to such a comprehensive providence. They are concerned that if God governs every detail of life, then human beings become little more than robots who execute the divine program that God has downloaded into their brains. At the same time, they suggest that if God's providence is all-inclusive, then humans are no longer responsible for their actions, and consequently God becomes responsible for human sins. For this reason, advocates of open theism propose a limitation on God's providence (also see chapter 5). They teach that God controls the general direction of world affairs but does not involve himself in the smaller details of daily living.

How shall we answer this challenge to the truth of Scripture? Is the Father of lights really the author of sin? Once more, the first step is to return to God's own Word. Two examples will suffice. The first is from Genesis, in the account where Joseph's brothers sold him as a slave to the Midianite merchants (Gen 37:12–36). It is clear that the brothers had sinful motivations for their actions. They were jealous of their brother Joseph. They were also angry about his dreams, which indicated that one day Joseph, though younger, would be superior to his older brothers. Driven by jealousy, anger, and greed, they therefore sinned against God and against Joseph by selling their sibling into slavery. These brothers could not, and should not, blame God for their actions. As the apostle James explains, they were not tempted by God. Rather, they were tempted when they were dragged away by their own evil desires, desires which started small but swiftly grew to malicious maturity (Jas 1:13–15).

Clearly, Joseph's brothers were responsible and accountable for their own sins. Yet God was involved in these events as well. Years later, when Joseph was re-united with his extended family and his father had died, his brothers became worried that he would take revenge on them. On that occasion Joseph said, "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. So do not fear; I will provide for you and

your little ones” (Gen 50:20–21). In other words, Joseph’s brothers, who sinned against him, were responsible for their evil deeds. They were *not* unaccountable robots. At the same time, by his providential power, God the Father was working in and through that sinful situation for a much better and grander purpose.

Another example can be found in the book of Job. When the Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and stole all of Job’s camels, they were clearly motivated by greed (Job 1:17). Their action was a direct transgression of the eighth commandment. Yet, at the same time, God was active in this situation for a completely different purpose. As the LORD reveals earlier in this chapter, Satan had cast doubt upon the sincerity of Job’s faith. But the LORD planned to prove, beyond any doubt, that the faith that he had worked in Job’s heart was sufficiently genuine to endure horribly agonizing trials (Job 1:6–12). In line with this, when tragedy after tragedy strikes Job, he confesses, “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). It remains true that the Chaldeans were the ones who grabbed Job’s camels and ran away with them. Yet, on another level, Job’s confession is also correct: “The LORD has taken away.” The Chaldeans intended it for evil, but the LORD planned it for good.

To sum up, then, God the Father is more than capable of governing over sins, and even turning evil toward good purposes, without ever being, or becoming, the Author of those same sins. As God, he can easily take the mud of iniquity and turn it into pottery that is useful for his purposes, all the while keeping his hands and his heart spotlessly free of all evil. The most brilliant example of this uniquely divine capability is Jesus Christ’s death by crucifixion. Surely, Christ did not deserve to be crucified. Surely his condemnation was the greatest legal injustice ever done to anyone—in this case to a man who was entirely innocent and free from all sin (Heb 4:15). Yet, miracle of miracles, out of this shocking injustice God brought forth an unspeakably great salvation for all those who put their trust in the Christ. It may be foolishness in the eyes of the world, but if we look at it with the eyes of faith, we stand amazed at the wonder of God’s wisdom (1 Cor 2:18–31).



## GOD'S PROVIDENCE AND OUR LIMITATIONS

God is sovereign also over wicked deeds, without becoming tainted by those sins. This is revealed in Scripture, but it is admittedly hard to understand. In fact, our human minds do not have the capacity to fathom the depths of God's providential ways. In Article 13 the Belgic Confession makes quite a point of this. After affirming that "in this world nothing happens without [God's] direction," it goes on to say:

Yet God is not the Author of the sins which are committed nor can he be charged with them. For his power and goodness are so great and beyond understanding that he ordains and executes his work in the most excellent and just manner, even when devils and wicked men act unjustly. And as to his actions surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire further than our capacity allows us. But with the greatest humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, and we content ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, who have only to learn those things which he teaches us in his Word, without transgressing these limits.

Simply put, there is a God-ordained roof over our heads. Everything that the heavenly Father teaches us in his Word we can, and we should, study eagerly. However, when we reach the limit of his revelation, we must rein in our curiosity; otherwise we are guilty of trespassing into God's own territory. The only thing gained by attempting that impertinent feat is a big goose egg and a bad headache from repeatedly banging our heads on the divinely ordained ceiling.

Now it is helpful to return to the tight connection between the doctrines of creation and providence. There are many things about the way God designed his creation that we simply do not understand (Job 38–41). To give but one example, who understands every detail of how a baby is formed in his mother's womb (Ps 139:13–18)? Likewise, we simply do not understand many things about our Father's providential governing. Why does our Father allow one to fall sick and another to stay healthy? How does he use disasters such as tsunamis and tornados to accomplish his good purposes? Often we cannot (fully) answer these *why* and *how* questions. But there is a more important question, the *who* question.

Whatever the circumstance may be, we always know who is firmly in control: our heavenly, loving Father, the Creator of heaven and earth. As the Belgic Confession explains at the end of Article 13, this is a great comfort:

This doctrine gives us inexpressible consolation, for we learn thereby that nothing can happen to us by chance, but only by the direction of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures so under his power that not one hair of our head—for they are all numbered—nor one sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father. In this we trust, because we know that he holds in check the devil and all our enemies so that they cannot hurt us without his permission and will.

#### OUR HEAVENLY FATHER USES ORDINARY MEANS

Since God *can* do miracles, some people expect that he *must* do miracles, and that he must do them when they desire or ask. For example, there are good number of preachers today who will tell you that if you just trust enough in God, he will make you healthy and he will make you wealthy. Sometimes people call this the health and wealth gospel. Conversely, these preachers often suggest that if you do not receive health or wealth, there must be something wrong with your faith. Perhaps you need to pray more, believe more strongly, or live a holier life.

Such a message simply does not line up with what God reveals. Job became very sick (2:7), even though he was a blameless and upright man (1:1). The apostle Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Tim 4:20). Even the apostle Paul himself was left with some kind of physical ailment, although he had prayed earnestly that the Lord would take it away from him (2 Cor 12:7–10). Moreover, when Timothy was not feeling well, the apostle Paul did not tell him to pray more or believe harder. He simply told him to include some wine in his diet, a remedy which can help with certain stomach ailments (1 Tim 5:23).

Concerning wealth, the Lord's instructions are quite clear. The apostle Paul directs the Thessalonians as follows: "We urge you . . . to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your

hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one” (1 Thess 4:11). In his second letter to the church at Thessalonica the apostle uses even stronger language. Concerning those walking in idleness, he writes: “Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” (2 Thess 3:12). Please notice the common theme in these passages. It is not *pray and become a millionaire*, but rather *work for your daily bread*.

God’s providence does not mean that we should avoid our duties. We need to take good care of our bodies, and when we become ill, we can certainly make use of the medicines and other medical treatments that are available to us. Similarly, we need to work diligently to earn an income and provide for the basic daily needs of our families. It remains true that God can still act in surprising and even extraordinary ways, restoring health when the doctors are unable to do anything more or providing financial resources from the most unexpected sources. However, the key thing to remember is that we may not demand these things from our Father in heaven. As a Father, God provides according to his wisdom, not necessarily according to our desires or agendas, let alone our fickle wishes and whims. Just as children often do not perceive the wisdom of their earthly parents until they grow up themselves, so also we may have to wait until the life hereafter to appreciate fully the wisdom of our heavenly Father’s providence in this present life.

*Suggested Readings: Job 1:13–22; James 1:12–18*

#### QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Give one similarity and one difference between creation and providence. Also, explain why they are significant.
2. It is comforting to know that the heavenly Father has all things in his sovereign hand. At the same time, the apostle Paul adds that “in him [that is, Christ] all things hold together” (Col 1:17). What exactly does this mean, and how does it add to our comfort?
3. When healthy parents have children who are seriously ill, they often

struggle to understand the Lord's ways. They feel that if anyone should be so sick, it should be they, for they are much older. Using what you have learned about providence in this chapter, what would you say to parents in such a situation?

4. Are sicknesses or other hardships necessarily a sign of God's disfavour? If we become sick, how should we think about it from a spiritual perspective? Can sickness ever be a sign of God's judgment? John 9:1–5, 1 Corinthians 11:30, and 2 Corinthians 12:9–10 will help you formulate an answer.

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Here is a scenario to consider: A devout Christian young lady is having trouble. She has just lost her job, although she worked very hard. Her fiancé has broken off their relationship, although she tried to be kind and loving toward him. On top of that, her unbelieving parents are blaming these hardships on her Christian faith. This sister is often praying, "Why, Lord?" and she does not feel that her question has been answered. What comfort can you give her? How should she respond to her parents?
2. Why were there so many miracles in the days of prophets such as Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and, of course, our Saviour Jesus Christ? Do miracles still happen today? What exactly is a miracle? How extraordinary does it need to be before it "qualifies" as a miracle? Is surviving a serious car crash truly a miracle, or should we reserve this term for events like the healing of a paralytic or the raising of the dead?
3. Here is another scenario to consider: A married couple is struggling to make ends meet, financially speaking. They have been praying about it. One day the husband comes home all excited because a mining company in northern Canada contacted him unexpectedly and offered him a job with nearly double the salary he presently receives. He says to his wife, "Don't you see it? It's the answer to our prayer. God has providentially opened up a door that we did not even know about." But moving up north would take them far away from both family and church. How far can we go in saying

that providential events are God's way of saying "Do this" or "Stop that"? Is God's providence equal to God's revealed will for our lives? Deuteronomy 29:29 will help.

4. Are there ever situations in life when a Christian is left with no choice but to sin? To say it in another way, can God's providence lead one of his children into such a dire situation that, whichever way he turns, he sees no other option than to commit a sin? Try to come up with a situation or two in which that might seem to be the case and then work with 1 Corinthians 10:10–13 and James 1:13–15 to answer the question.

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