



The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 5:

Temptation and God's Providence

Rabbi Duncan once expressed the view that one of the greatest mysteries in his faith was why God did not take His people to glory immediately. Why does He leave them in this world, where they must battle with sin within and without? What is God's purpose in leaving His children to do battle with this fierce enemy?

This is the question that is addressed by the Confession of Faith in Chapter 5, Section 5, where it talks of God's leaving His children to grapple with the problem of sin and temptation in this fallen world in which they live. In a marvellously pastoral statement, the Confession first lists the situation to which the Christian is exposed in God's Providence, and then suggests four reasons why this is so.

The situation

The believer's God is *"wise, righteous and gracious"*. The fountain of wisdom is with him, as is the fountain of all righteousness and grace. And it is this God that exposes his children to a situation where sin seems to be prevalent on ever side.

There are *"manifold temptations"* in the Christian life to which we are open every day. Our enemy is the tempter, and sin opens temptation's door for us so readily. The lie is employed with consummate skill, and dressed as the truth; and before we know where we are, we have eaten the forbidden fruit.

Concerning temptation, the Bible says that no man is tempted (to sin) by God. *"...each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires, and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death"* (James 1:14-15).

God also leaves his children, the Confession teaches, *"to the corruption of their own hearts"*. That means that they are made to realise, painfully at times, the capacity that they have to disappoint and disobey God, and to walk the path of estrangement. Although they can never fall out of covenant love or covenant security, they can forfeit their conscious experience and enjoyment of covenant blessings. God shows his children, at such times as these, that if they are not enjoying God as they ought, the problem lies with themselves, and not with him.

The purpose

God, however, is not a capricious deity. He does not like to see his children suffer. The reason that he brings home to them their capacity to sin is three-fold.

First, there is chastisement for former sins. What child does the Father have without chastisement? Only those who are not truly within the relationship of these family ties are without chastisement. The Father's disciplining care is a mark that we are truly his.

One of the ways in which he chastises his own is to show them how much more sin remains in their hearts. He disciplines them for past failings by showing them their capacity for future failings. They are made all the more aware of the strength of sin, even in lives where the *dominion* of sin has been broken.

Second, God exposes his children to temptation and to their own hearts to humble them. He does this by showing them *"the hidden strength of corruption, and deceitfulness of their own hearts"*. A sight of ourselves as we truly are is the antidote to all pride. Boasting is excluded in the kingdom of grace. The sense of our own inability, of our own unworthiness, of our own liability to err is humbling indeed.

This goes against the whole trend of much modern psychology which fuels the cult of the self by aiming at high self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. God's purpose is not to break down a person's spirit by continually harassing him about the sin of which he is capable. His purpose rather is to show us ourselves in such a way that it will lead us to an even greater appreciation of the power of grace. For it is to the humble that God gives grace, while he resists the proud and sends him away empty (James 4:6; cf. Luke 1:53). It is those who are poor in spirit that are blessed (Matthew 5:3). To be poor in spirit is not to be spiritually poor, but rich in the things of God.

The sense of our own deceitfulness and corruption is what produce humility in the child of God. It is the discovery of what we are capable of,

"Where was my understanding," wrote Richard Baxter, "when I played so boldly with the flames of hell, the wrath of God, the poison of sin! When God stood by, and yet I sinned! When conscience rebuked me, and yet I sinned! ... will the Lord pardon what is past, I am resolved through his grace to do things no more. I will loathe that filth that I took for pleasure, and abhor that sin that I made my sport ... Holiness or nothing shall be my work and life".

This is the breathing of the soul that has known its own capacity for evil, and that has discovered that it must come empty to Christ in order to be filled with his blessing.

Third, God humbles his children in order that they might come *"to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them watchful against all future occasions of sin"*. His Providence is in the service of grace; by the events – even by the sins – that his Providence permits in their lives, God works a continued miracle of grace, keeping the spiritual life active and healthy, and drawing the soul to a closer walk with himself.

Surely this is the great aim of every child of God – to go forward in his strength more and more, looking to him and acknowledging him as Lord. Without him we are nothing. The very Providence that shapes our lives and that causes events to fall out as they do, shows us what we are. How privileged we are that God has made his very Creation, and the history of our lives in it, our teachers pointing out to us that sin remains a powerful force in our experience, any reminding us of the daily need to lean on our beloved in this world.

The Westminster Confession closes its discussion of the Providence of God by considering the relationship between God's sovereign rule over the world (a) with *"wicked and ungodly men"* and (b) with his church.

In the case of the former, the Confession tells us that God acts judicially to blind and harden men for 'boar' sins. He withholds grace, withdraws gifts, exposes men to the corruption that makes occasion of sin and gives them over to their own lusts. This is, at one level, simply an assertion of the Bible's doctrine that there is no area of life or of behaviour over which God does not reign supreme. At the same time, it raises a host of questions regarding God's attitude to the ungodly.

There is a tendency for us to imagine that there is only one judgement, the judgement committed to the Son to be realised on God's appointed day at the end of human history (Acts 17:31). But the Confession reminds us that although this is the *final* judgement, God acts judiciously in his Providence in this life. God sovereignly judges some men for their sins by removing the influences which would in other cases lead to a saving knowledge of Christ.

Thus we read in Romans 1:26 of God handing men over to unnatural affections. We find Satan, who always acts subject to God's permissive decree, blinding men lest the light of the Gospel

shine in their hearts (2 Corinthians 4:2). The classic case of this in Scripture is Pharaoh, whose heart God hardened (Exodus 7:3) since he would not release the Israelites.

Yet at the same time, the sin of the hardened heart is Pharaoh's own. God does not author sin, nor can he approve of sin in any sense. He forbids it absolutely. It is his sovereign prerogative to deliver from its power and its reign. Yet as punishment for sin he leaves some to the devastating consequences of sin.

For this, men alone are responsible. The Confession reminds us that men harden themselves against God, even through Providences which soften others and cause others to bow before the sovereignty of God in Christ. The sun that melts the wax hardens the clay.

Finally, the Confession reminds us that God takes care of his church *"in a most special manner"*. The outworking of God's purpose continues to have as its great design the continuance, growth and final purification of His people. It was not in vain that God began a good work in them; nor was it that he might at length abandon that work or his church. His special attention is given to his special people, for whom he gave his all.

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