

Lesson 6 - Providence in General

1. Assenting to God's providence -- great explanations in the Heidelberg Catechism.
 - a. Q. 1. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.
 - b. Q. 27. What do you understand by the providence of God? A. The almighty and ever present power of God by which God upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.
 - c. Q. 28. How does the knowledge of God's creation and providence help us? A. We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing in creation will separate us from his love. For all creatures are so completely in God's hand that without his will they can neither move nor be moved.
2. Assenting to God's providence in the Westminster Standards. Crucial to glorifying and enjoying God. We are enjoying Him every day.
 - a. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable . . . (WCF 1.1).
 - b. WLC 192 What do we pray for in the third petition? A. In the third petition (which is, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven,) acknowledging, that by nature we and all men are not only utterly unable and unwilling to know and do the will of God, but prone to rebel against his word, *to repine and murmur against his providence*, and wholly inclined to do the will of the flesh, and of the devil: we pray, that God would by his Spirit take away from ourselves and others all blindness, weakness, indisposedness, and perverseness of heart; and by his grace *make us able and willing to know, do, and submit to his will in all things, with the like humility, cheerfulness, faithfulness, diligence, zeal, sincerity, and constancy*, as the angels do in heaven.
 - c. WLC 193 - In the 4th petition, "Give us this day our daily bread," we pray: "we pray for ourselves and others, that both they and we, waiting upon the providence of God from day to day in the use of lawful means, may, of his free gift, and as to his fatherly wisdom shall seem best, enjoy a competent portion of them; and have the same continued and blessed unto us in our holy and comfortable use of them, and contentment in them; and be kept from all things that are contrary to our temporal support and comfort."
3. A beautiful definition: "God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, 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.”
4. God’s providence and secondary causes. WCF 5.2 Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.
 - a. How God directs free secondary causes (i.e., the free will of men). Dabney: He used the analogy of how humans can “determine” the future to explain how God could: “What are those means? Volitions are caused. The efficient causes of volitions are the soul’s own dispositions; the occasional causes are the objects providentially presented to those dispositions. Even we may, in many cases, so know dispositions as efficiently to procure, and certainly to predict, given volitions, through the presentation of objective causes thereof. An infinite understanding may so completely know all dispositions and all their complex workings, as to foretell and produce volitions thus in every case, as we are able to do in many cases. Add to this, omnipotent, providential power, which is able to surround any soul with circumstances so adapted to his known dispositions, as infallibly to prove the occasions of given desired volitions” (Chapter 21 of *Systematic Theology*, 288).
 - b. Explanation of chocolate and children. The vending machine.
 5. God can work without or above them. This is generally what we call a miracle. “God, in His ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure” (5.3).
 6. The permission of sin
 - a. The fall - 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 (5.4).
 - b. Explanation, Dabney: “God does not will the sin of the act, for the sake of its sinfulness; but only wills the result to which the act is a means, and that result is always worthy of his holiness. E.g.: A righteous king besieged by wicked rebels, may arrange a sally, with a view to their righteous defeat, and the glorious deliverance of the good citizens, in which he knows the rebels will slay some of his soldiers. This slaying is sin; the good king determines efficaciously to permit it; not for the sake of the slaying, but for the sake of the righteous triumph of which it is part means. The death of these good soldiers is the sin of the rebels; the righteousness of the end in view, is the king’s (*Systematic Theology*, 289).
 - c. In believers. “The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes

leave, for a season, His own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends” (WCF 5.5). Note that this is part of God’s dynamic with His children as described in the rest of the Confession.

- d. In hardening the unbeliever. This offers a description of how God “hardens” people’s hearts, as described in Scripture. “As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them He not only withholdeth His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasions of sin; and, withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan, whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others” (WCF 5.6).