

The Providential Watch-care of God ...

Intro. The subject of our study, from the Word of God, this morning is: **“The Providential Watch-care of God.”** I believe this is a much-needed message because it is a vital truth that, for the most part, has been lost in these modern times.

The people of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries had much more of a sense of the presence of God, and the providential watch-care of God over their lives. ... We have a city in the USA named **“Providence Rhode Island.”** It was named that in the 18th century, and probably before that, by a generation of people with a world view that included a God Who ruled over the direction and government of their lives [personally and collectively, ... as a community].

You can go to Washington D.C. and read the archives of many of the founding Fathers of our country (such as Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, etc.) and you will see in them numerous references to the providential working of God in the direction of history, and in people’s personal lives.

... Like many other Christians in our generation here in the U.S., I am a great fan of **the late Pastor-Teacher-scholar, R.C. Sproul, with Ligonier ministries.** ... Recently, I have been listening to his lectures on “The Providence of God.” ... I found this material [for me] to be **a source of refreshment and comfort for my soul.** [I’ve been exposed to teaching about the sovereignty of God and His providential control in all things from writers like **A.W. Pink, Jerry Bridges, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones** and others for many years... **But the doctrine of “God’s providence” has ALSO been a source of great ‘disagreement’ and ‘conflict’ among believers.**

Our church is **‘Reformed’** in its theology, ... and at the heart of Reformed theology is the doctrine of the ‘Sovereignty’ of God, ... (i.e. the fact that God is absolutely sovereign in all things), ... and this includes the belief in the providential working of God in all circumstances and all events. Many have left this church and other churches which expound ‘Reformed Theology’, because they do not like the idea of a God who is ‘absolutely’ sovereign and in control of all things [i.e., they refuse to accept the teaching of Scripture on this subject]. ... For them, God’s power is ‘limited’, and mankind has the power to overrule the will of God,

Therefore, in this ‘Sermon’ [which is probably more ‘teaching’ than ‘preaching’], we will examine **the doctrine of “The Providential watch-care of God” [especially] in the lives of Christian men and women.**

... From the beginning **I acknowledge that I am drawing heavily on the lectures of R.C. Sproul and other scholars** – I will often be using their own words to more accurately represent this doctrine ...

***[NOTE:** ... R.C. Sproul’s lectures on the Providence of God can be found on “teaching” section of the Ligonier Ministry website and app].

... But, as you will see, ... this is “deep” and “heavy” stuff. ... And I don’t pretend to be able to adequately cover this subject on my own [especially in one single sermon]. Nor am I able to adequately describe some of these truths in my own words. I need to rely heavily upon ‘the very words’ of some teachers who are far greater scholars than I. (Therefore, **I will be reading a lot of “quotes” today.**) ...

At the beginning, I need to set the stage by comparing the different **world-views** of people which contribute to their belief, or unbelief, in the sovereign, providential, working of God in all things.

R.C. Sproul commented: “one of the dominant concepts for the last couple of 100 years in western society is the idea that we live in ‘a closed mechanistic universe,’ ... that there was no possibility for intrusion from outside, ... and that everything operated here according to naturally fixed laws of the universe. ... It’s sort of like a machine that functions by its own inner machinations. ... **But even those who introduced that idea** as early as the 17th century and in the 18th century still posited **the idea of a ‘God’ who built the machine in the first place;** ... they still couldn't get away from the need for the idea of a ‘Creator’... because those people were intelligent thinkers and scientists and they said, ... ‘look we couldn't have a scientific world to be observing if there isn't some kind of ultimate cause for all of these things’” [i.e., what we would call an **“Intelligent Designer”**]

“... even though **(the) idea of ‘an involved ‘providential governor’ of the daily affairs of life’ was being questioned and challenged** [in that early time period] it still was tacitly assumed that there had to be a ‘Creator’ above and beyond the creature, or the created order. ... And of course, **now**, that is in the focal point of dispute in our own days ...” [i.e. **in our own time, modern “scientists,” theologians and philosophers have rejected the idea of an ‘Intelligent Creator,’** ... the ‘God’ who stands behind the universe in which we live.]

But in the classical concept of **‘Providence’** with respect to Christian theology, ... **the idea of God's ‘Providence’ is very closely bound up with his role as the “Creator” of the universe** because, as I said, it's not simply [that] God ‘creates’ the universe and then turns his back on it and loses touch with it, nor is it simply that God sits on his throne in heaven and watches this ‘machine’ work by its own inner mechanism.”

I should inject here, that men have devised different ideas about God when it comes to trying to explain the idea of God’s sovereignty. ... **Louis Berkhof**, in his “Systematic Theology,” explains that, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, theologians in the Catholic church and Armenian theologians, set forth what is called **“Deism.”** **Berkoff** says this about *deism*: ...

*“... According to **deism** God's concern with the world is not universal, special and perpetual; but only of a general nature. At the time of Creation he imparted to all his creatures certain inalienable properties, placed them under invariable laws, and **left them** to work out their destiny by their own inherent powers. ... Meanwhile he merely exercises a ‘general oversight’, not of the specific agents that appear on the scene, but of the general laws which he has established. ... The world is simply a **machine** which God has put in motion, and not at all a vessel which he pilots from day-to-day.”*

But, as R.C. Sproul argues [from the Biblical position]: “As [God] Is the **‘primary cause’ of the ‘universe,’ he is also the primary cause, ... listen carefully ..., of everything in the universe and everything that takes place in the universe.** ... Again, the foundational principle of Christian theology is that **nothing, ... ‘no thing’ in this world, has intrinsic ‘causal’ power. Nothing has any power save the power that is vested in it or loaned to it, - if you will - , or worked through it, ... which ultimately is the power of God.**”

“Now [says Sproul] “that doesn't mean, [and] I'm not saying, that I don't have any power to do anything or that you don't have any power to do anything. I am saying you don't have it in and of yourselves, you don't have it by your own strength eternally, and that's why theologians and philosophers historically have made a crucial distinction between **‘primary causality’ and ‘secondary causality.’** ... **The fact that God is ‘primary’ means he's the ‘first’ cause, he's the author of all that is, [and] ... not only back then in time, but that he continues to be the ‘primary’ cause of human events and of natural occurrences.** ... Now **that primary cause doesn't exclude secondary causes; ... it doesn't mean that he works apart from us or that there's no such thing as a causal ... [“link”, or “connection”] in nature.”** [between the **primary and secondary cause**].

Then, **Sproul uses this illustration**: “We’re saying that **when the ‘rain’ falls the grass gets wet ‘not’** because God makes the grass wet directly and immediately without the falling of the rain; it’s the rain that causes the grass to get wet, but the point I’m saying is that the rain couldn’t fall and even if it did fall the grass couldn’t get wet if it weren’t for **the causal power of God** that stands over and above that **secondary** activity that’s taking place. The **modern man** has cut it off at the knees and **says** we have the rain we have the wet grass and we don’t need the primary cause **we could just go along fine with secondary causes and never mind the primary causes.**”

... “Now **the simple concept that we have here is that “what God creates he sustains”** ... So one of the important subdivisions under the concept of ‘Providence’ in theology is the concept of “**divine sustenance**,”... that is, God is **not** the great watchmaker who **builds** the watch, **winds** it up, and then steps out of the picture. ...>> But, **what He makes - He ‘preserves’; and he ‘sustains’.**” ...

... **Sproul goes on to point out** that another “... **one of the most profound and profoundly important theological concepts in all of the world is the whole concept of God as the author of being.**” Sproul says “you could not ‘be’ without a ‘supreme’ being because you don’t have the power of being. I mean, **if any Pagan, if any atheist** in the United States of America would **think** about “being” seriously and logically for 5 minutes it would be the end of atheism, because everyone knows as well as they know anything that **no one in this world has the power of being within himself, and yet, ‘somewhere’ there must be one who ‘does’ have the power of being within himself or it would be absolutely scientifically impossible for “anything” to “be”!** ... **If there’s no ‘supreme being,’ folks, ... there’s no ‘being,’ there’s nothing! ... And, if there’s ‘something’ there must be ‘something that has the power of being’ or nothing would ‘be.’** ... It’s that simple, ... you don’t have to have a PhD in philosophy. ... Let me say it again: **If anything ‘exists’ then “something” must have the power of ‘being’ within itself or ‘nothing’ would ‘be’;** it’s that simple.”

The point we’re making here is what **the apostle Paul** says to the pagans of his day [in the book of Acts, ch. 17], - to the Greeks ... there in Athens - ... when he says, ‘... they had, **their altar to ‘the unknown God’** [you remember that passage], he said: *whom you worship in ignorance I declare to you in power that **it is in him that we live and move and have our being.*** ... That is, ... that what God does is, that, **when he creates, ... whatever exists is not only dependent upon God’s power for its ‘origin’ of existence, ... but it is equally dependent upon the power of God for its ‘continuity’ of existence.**”

There is also **another man-made theory of God** that is relevant at this point, and that is called “**Pantheism.**” An article on Pantheism in **the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology by C.E. Plumptre** says: ... “The word, coming from the Greek ‘pan’ and ‘theos’, **means “everything is God.”** ... It was coined by John Toland in 1705 to refer to a philosophical system. ... Pantheism **rejects the biblical teaching of the ‘transcendence’ of God** whereas biblical theism distinguishes between God and the world. ... **the biblical understanding of God and the world** is that God is **eternal** and the world is **finite.**” In other words, **God exists above and apart from the world.** ... This means that the words of the apostle Paul in Acts 17 [“... **it is in him that we live and move and have our being**” ... have reference to God’s providential work in **‘upholding’ the ‘being’ of mankind and the world, ... and in ‘governing’ it all.**”

Now, having said all this, let me turn to **the Westminster Confession** and its definition of the doctrine of **God’s providential rule over all things** in the universe.

The Westminster Confession of Faith

CHAPTER 3

Of God’s Eternal Decree.

I. God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass:^a yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin,^b nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.^c

^a Eph. 1:11 ; Rom. 11:33 ; Heb. 6:17 ; Rom. 9:15 ,18.

^b Jam. 1:13,17; 1 John 1:5.

^c Acts 2:23; Matt. 17:12; Acts 4:27,28; John 19:11; Prov. 16:33. [Gen. 50:20]

First phrase: “God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain **whatsoever** comes to pass ...”

***NOTE:** This is a very difficult teaching for people to believe and accept, **but it is clearly taught in Scripture:** ...

- 1) Ephesians 1:11 – “*In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to **the plan** of him who works out ‘**everything**’ in conformity with **the purpose of his will** ...*”

NOTE that **God has a ‘purpose’ [a plan]**, and He works out ‘**everything**’ in conformity with that purpose, in order to accomplish all that He pleases!

Isaiah 46:9-11 - *Remember the former things, those of long ago;*

I am God, and there is no other;

I am God, and there is none like me.

¹⁰ *I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come.*

*I say, ‘**My purpose will stand,**
and I will do all that I please.’*

¹¹ ...

What I have said, that I will bring about;
what I have planned, that I will do.

Ephesians 3:11 - God has an “**Eternal Purpose**”, which he is accomplishing through Jesus Christ!

Ephesians 1:9-11- “... he made known to us **the mystery of his will** [His “purpose”; His “**Eternal Purpose**”!] according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—**to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.**”

¹¹ **In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to ‘the plan’ of him who works out ‘everything’ in conformity with ‘the purpose’ of his will ...”**

Hebrews 6:17-19 – “Because God wanted to make **the unchanging nature of ‘his purpose’** very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.¹⁸ God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us **may be greatly encouraged.**¹⁹ We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure ...”

Romans 8:28 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called 'according to his purpose'.*

Romans 11:36 – *“For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.”*

Second Phrase: >>>

“... yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures , ...”

James 1:13, 17 – *“When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone” ... [i.e. God does not “cause” anyone to sin! ... He is not the author of sin!]*

v. 17 *“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” [God is 'immutably good', and cannot/could not, change at any point and become the author of sin]*

I John 1:5 – *“This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.”*

I John 3:5 – *“... he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.”*

Titus 1:2 – *“... in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not [cannot] lie, promised before the beginning of time ...”*

So, then the question arises, **where did sin come from?** ...

Read the account of the sin and rebellion of Satan in Ezekiel 28:11-19, and you will see that the **from the beginning** in all of God's creation, **sin had its origin, not in God, but in a 'creature,' ... a fallen angel we have come to know as Lucifer, or Satan**. ...

Ezekiel 28:11-15 – ¹¹ *The word of the LORD came to me: ¹² “Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says:*

*“‘You were the seal of perfection,
full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.*

¹³ *You were in Eden,*

the garden of God;

every precious stone adorned you:

—~~carnelian, chrysolite and emerald,~~

—~~topaz, onyx and jasper,~~

—~~lapis lazuli, turquoise and beryl.~~

Your settings and mountings were made of gold; >

on the day 'you were created' they were prepared.

¹⁴ You were anointed as a guardian cherub.

for so I ordained you.

You were on the holy mount of God;

you walked among the fiery stones.

¹⁵ You were blameless in your ways

from the day 'you were created'

till wickedness was found in you. ...<<<

But then, ... the question is asked: ...“Then, since God is ‘omniscient,’ and ‘knows’ all things, even before they happen, ... isn’t He the author of sin because He created and made creatures He knew would sin. The answer to that question is “No”! ...

It is true that, since God “ordains whatsoever comes to pass” that He did “ordain” that sin would indeed ‘exist’ in His creation, but that does not make Him the ‘author,’ or the ‘cause’ of sin! ... Rather, the teaching of Scripture is that He “allowed” sin to come into existence through His fallen creatures [Satan and fallen mankind] ... “by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will” ... i.e. ... to ‘use’ it to manifest the glory of His mercy, His grace, His compassion, and His steadfast love.

Think about it ...

Without the presence of ‘sin’ in the creation, God would not have had to demonstrate His amazing grace, love, compassion and mercy in His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And, that act of love on Calvary’s cross is at the center of God’s eternal purpose and His ultimate solution for a lost and condemned world [Eph. 3:11 & 1:9-11].

[AN IMPORTANT QUALIFICATION]... Now none of this is to say, as some have suggested, that “sin” is, therefore ultimately a “good” thing ... [i.e. that Satan, or Judas could in the end argue that what they did was not evil, but good.] ... That is why ‘Hell’ exists, ... i.e. as a proof of God’s hatred of sin, wickedness and evil, ... and as an eternal reminder of the ‘justice’ of God! ... It is a testimony to the absolute brilliance and genius of God, that He could actually USE sin [something that He did not initiate or cause] to demonstrate His Grace, love and compassion, as well as His Justice and holiness.

Third phrase:

“... nor is the liberty or contingency of **second causes** taken away, but rather established ...”

R.C. Sproul says, “In theology, and in the study of the doctrine of Providence, we have a word that is very important. ... ‘**Concurrence**’ simply refers to actions involving two or more parties that are taking place ‘**current**’ with one another. ... They are **occurring together** with somebody else’s actions and they happen to dovetail, or converge, in history. ... **In other words, you have the same activity where two or more parties are involved in that activity and the particular role of the parties involved is not necessarily the same as the other party.**” “the Christian doctrine of the relationship between **God’s divine sovereignty** and **human volitional actions** is called “**the doctrine of concurrence**” ... this is a word we call the events that seem to **merge** between **human actions** and **divine actions.**”

R.C. Sproul says, “... my favorite **illustration**, I think everybody’s favorite illustration of it is **the story of Joseph**. “... you recall how that **Joseph** was favored by his father Jacob and Jacob bought Joseph this Technicolor coat for his birthday and the other brothers were fiercely jealous of this favored treatment that

Joseph had received and so while they're out one day they decide to kill Joseph, ... but one of the brothers objects to that, and so, instead of killing him they're going to throw him in a pit. And (then) they take him out and they sell him to these caravan traders who **happen** to be going down to Egypt. And so (you know the story), Joseph is carried off to Egypt where the caravan traders “happened” to run into one of the officers of the guard in Pharaoh's court of Potiphar. And, Joseph becomes a slave in Potiphar's house. ... And it just, (you know), ‘coincidentally’ happened to be that Potiphar was married to an unscrupulous woman who made an illicit advance against Joseph; and Joseph refused her advances and said, ‘How can I sin against God in this way?’ And hell knows no fury like a woman scorned, so she hollered ‘rape,’ ... and before you knew it Joseph is thrown into prison. And, while he's in prison he just happened to meet this butcher and Baker and Candlestick maker (who were also) in the prison. And they have conversations, and they learn that Joseph has this ability to interpret dreams. ... Finally, one of them gets out (of prison) and tells the pharaoh about Joseph's ability.... And Pharaoh is having nightmares; ... and Joseph comes out and interprets his dreams and does it accurately. ... And the **pharaoh was so grateful that he appoints Joseph as the Prime Minister of Egypt.**

This all happened at the time when **famine** came upon the land (and **Jacob's family**) and they were starving. And so **Jacob** sends some of the boys down into Egypt to inquire about getting some of the surplus food that the Prime Minister has been thoughtful enough to keep for the Egyptian people. And so, ‘by coincidence,’ the brothers years later “happened” to meet up with Joseph and ... Joseph hides his identity for a while, ... and then, finally, he reveals that he is their long lost brother, ... he embraces them with tears, and in the course of their reconciliation, the brothers have fallen all over themselves with apologies to Joseph, and then Joseph makes the comment ... ‘What you meant for evil, God meant it for good’, ...

But, notice that Joseph says: ‘You meant it for evil!’ ... Joseph doesn't whitewash the sin of his brothers! ... ‘You meant it for evil!’ ... Your involvement; ... your free volitional activity in this was indeed evil. The brothers of Joseph were guilty of sin, and it was sin that they personally wanted to do. They freely chose it! **But [here's the point!] God stands above our choices and can work through human freedom to bring about his own providential will, and this is what Joseph is saying:** ‘... you chose to do something sinful, but *all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose*, and my brothers, I'm called according to the purpose of God and **God** has meant good through this.’

Conclusion: Now all of this brings us to ‘the conclusion’ that the God of the Bible is absolutely “Sovereign,” and that He, indeed, is in control of “all things.” [i.e. able to control all things and work His will “**providentially**” behind the scenes of this world.]

Jesus said: *“Even the tiniest sparrow doesn't fall to the ground apart from the will of the Father.”* [Matt. 10:29]

One “Biblical” **definition of “God”** says that: **“God” is the sovereign and absolute ruler of the universe; ... the source of all moral authority, the supreme being.**

R.C. Sproul has commented that if there is one speck of cosmic dust, or one molecule in all of the universe that is **not** under the control of God, then He is not “sovereign,” and He is not “**God**.” ... This would mean that we could question the “promises” of His Word [i.e., whether He is actually ‘able’ to do all He has promised, since He wouldn't have complete control of all things]. ... It would mean that He is merely a kindly, well-meaning, “grandfather type”, who sits in the heavens and expresses His “wishes”, and then wrings His hands “**hoping**” that everything will somehow work out alright in the end.

... But, because God **is** “sovereign,” ... He **IS** able, and ... He **CAN** do whatever He pleases! And, the good news is, ... not only “can” He do as He pleases, ... but **He is willing** to act on our behalf – and for our good - in the circumstances of our lives (Rom. 8:28); ... i.e. **He is a “benevolent God”!**] *“working all things together for good for those who are called according to his purpose”* (Rom. 8:28); ... **acting as a benevolent God,**

... exercising His Sovereignty for the Providential Watch-care over His entire creation and especially for those who hold a position of special privilege and favor before Him in His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ!

Everything in creation is under the providing [“sustaining”] care of God. Not only does God supply all things, He arranges them according to his plan for his glory. For Christians, this ought to produce peace and comfort even when it ‘appears’ that all is against them.

I conclude also **with some examples of God’s promises** that take on new meaning and give greater peace and assurance to the Christian when one realizes the truth of God’s sovereign, providential watch-care over us: ...

Deut. 33:27 – *“The sovereign God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms ...”*

“Listen to me, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived and carried since you were born, even in your old age and grey hairs I will uphold you ...” [Isa. 46:3-4]

Fear not for I am with you’ Be not dismayed for I am your God; I will strengthen you, yea I will uphold you *with the right had of my righteousness* [Ias. 41:10]

Fear not for I have redeemed you, I have summoned you by name and you are mine , When you pass through the waters ... [Isa. 43:1-5]

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ... [Psa. 23]

The steadfast love of the Lord is forever, his mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness ... [Lam. 3:22-23]

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me; You know when I sit and when I rise, ... [Psa. 139]

Col. 1:17 – *“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

The End