

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 18

Halifax, 18 November 2007

Q. 18 What are God's works of providence?

A. God's works of providence are His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving, and governing all His creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to His own glory.

We have already looked quite extensively at providence when we studied about God's decrees—

- We saw that of Him and through Him and to Him are all things to whom be the glory forever...
 - We emphasised that His decree extends to everything—all His creatures and all their actions...
- And we considered how God executes His decrees by looking at Psalm 33 where we saw:
 - that He always does what is right and just...
 - that He always acts with wisdom...
 - that He operates with ease (carries out His plan with irresistible power—He always dominates)
 - and we saw that His actions extend even to the heart of both the wicked and the righteous.
- In other words, we saw that He carries out His work with holiness, wisdom, and power.

And because we have looked at these aspects of God's providence,

- Tonight I want to focus on the two aspects that are mentioned here that we haven't spent as much time on—His preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions.
- As I was thinking about different scripture passages that I might read from, there were many that came to mind...
 - There are many Psalms that speak of God's preservation (121, 145, 104).
 - There is the wonderful account of Joseph and how God saved Israel through a series of marvellous providences around him.
 - There is the whole book of Esther where so many circumstances all come together in order that God's people may be spared and that Haman might be destroyed.

- There is the book of Daniel where God shows King Nebuchadnezzar that the LORD is the one that rules.
- There was so much to choose from...
 - But I finally decided on a reading that speaks directly about God's preservation of His people.
 - **READ**> Isa 46:1-13

In this reading, you can see how God is trying to get His people to look at the big picture.

- As they were now on the verge of captivity,
 - the very shallow mindedness of them would cause them to think that perhaps God was unable to deliver them from their enemies.
 - When we look at the church under persecution, and we see it seeming to decline in North America and turning to frivolous worship,
 - We might begin to say,
 - “Where is God in all this? Why does He let the world take the church over?”
- But pointing to the big picture, God reminds us that He has always carried us.
 - When there were only a few voices for the truth just before the reformation, it looked as if all would end...
 - But then God brought forth the reformation.
 - It was all part of His work in them...
 - All along He was carrying them, just as it says in Isa 46:3-4.
 - **Isa 46:3-4: Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been upheld by Me from birth, who have been carried from the womb: even to your old age, I am He, and even to gray hairs I will carry you! I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.**
 - He then shows that He is not like the idols that the nations worship—there is no comparison...
 - He is different because He declares the end from the beginning:
 - He is the one who controls what happens...
 - **Isa 46:8-10: Remember this, and show yourselves men; recall to mind, O you transgressors. Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,’**
 - This is what you need to remember when you wonder where God is...

- He is the One who is always in control—
- Even when it looks like things are at an end, He still carries out His purpose...
 - When Israel was surrounded by the Red Sea and the advancing Egyptians and the mountains, it looked like the end...
 - When the captivity came, it looked like the end...
 - When Jesus was crucified, it looked like the end...
 - When the church was killing all its faithful before the protestant reformation, it looked like the end...
 - But it was not the end—it was God’s plan
 - God had control of the beginning and the end.
 - He would do all His pleasure.
- In Isa 46:11, God calls the Babylonians a bird of prey from the east that will come to destroy...
 - And He tells them plainly before hand that HE is sending that bird—He is in control of it, and the final result—in the big picture—will be salvation...
 - The coming of the Babylonians is His plan—it is not things gone out of control:
 - **Isa 46:11-13: Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it. Listen to Me, you stubborn-hearted, who are far from righteousness: I bring My righteousness near, it shall not be far off; My salvation shall not linger. And I will place salvation in Zion, for Israel My glory.**

We have to get the big picture!

- Everything that happens is bringing forth the kingdom of God.
 - It is all what God has planned...
 - The reading of the OT prophets make that crystal clear—
 - If we weren’t so stubborn, we would be able to see it!
 - God is preserving and God is governing—nothing happens apart from Him!
 - Always remember that when trials come...
 - No matter what the trial is, He sent it...
 - And if you are believer, He sent it to preserve you—for salvation and not for destruction.

TRANS> Okay, lets look at those two aspects of God’s providence—preserving and governing.

I. First, let's consider various ways in which God preserves us.

A. First, the way He preserves our natural lives

1. He provides for our needs (food, opportunities, and clothing)
 - **Psalm 145:15-16: The eyes of all look expectantly to You, and You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.**
 - **Matthew 6:28: “So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”**
 - The application is that you don't need to worry because God will care for you.
 - Yet, we are called to work as a means of providing for ourselves:
 - When Israel came from the wilderness to the promised land, God cut off the manna
2. He provides protection
 - God raises up armies and gives them victory
 - **Pr 21:31: The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but deliverance is of the LORD.**
 - He determines the outcome of every battle—that is why we should pray for His blessing and why we should give Him thanks.
 - God's protection extends even to the heart of our enemies
 - He is able to keep them from coveting for our safety...
 - When Israel had their appointed feasts, He promised to do this:
 - **Exodus 34:23-24: “Three times in the year all your men shall appear before the Lord, the LORD God of Israel. For I will cast out the nations before you and enlarge your borders; neither will any man covet your land when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year.”**
 - He can also make them afraid of us:
 - **Ex 23:27: “I will send My fear before you, I will cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you.”**
 - It is funny the way this happens—sometimes they are afraid, and sometimes they are not—it is all according to what God does.
3. He gives us health...He uses many means to do this...

- a. by means of our bodies (immune system, nervous system, reflexes)
 - **Psalm 139: I am fearfully and wonderfully made.**
- b. by His will
 - **De 7:15: And the LORD will take away from you all sickness, and will afflict you with none of the terrible diseases of Egypt which you have known, but will lay *them* on all those who hate you.**
 - **De 28:60: Moreover He will bring back on you all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you.**
- c. by means of physicians
 - When Hezekiah was sick, Isaiah told him to use a medical remedy, but it would be medical remedy that God would bless.
 - **Isa 38:21 Now Isaiah had said, "Let them take a lump of figs, and apply [it] as a poultice on the boil, and he shall recover."**

TRANS> The point is that God is behind our health (or lack thereof)

- 4. He uses angels to protect us from physical harm (Psalm 91:11-12)
 - **Psalm 91:11-12: For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In [their] hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.**
 - We aren't able to see them, but He uses them in all sorts of ways.
- 5. by hedging us about (as Job)
 - When you are free from troubles, it is because God is keeping them out.
 - When you have troubles, it is because He has let them in, for His own purpose and glory.
 - **Job 1:9-12: So Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!" And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has *is* in your power; only do not lay a hand on his *person*." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.**

B. Secondly, look at the way He preserves our spiritual lives

- 1. He provides the means of grace (Psalm 147:19-20,)
 - **Psalm 147:19-20: He declares His word to Jacob, His statutes and His judgments to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; And [as for His] judgments, they have not known them. Praise the LORD!**

- **Romans 3:1-2: What advantage then has the Jew, or what *is* the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.**
2. He keeps us from temptation and delivers us from evil
 - a. There are millions of ways that God keeps us from temptation that we don't know about.
 - In Ex 13, we are told about one such way:
 - **Exodus 13:17-18 Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them *by* way of the land of the Philistines, although that *was* near; for God said, "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt." So God led the people around *by* way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt.**
 - He did not give them more than they could bear.
 - 1 Cor 10:13 is God's promise that no temptation has taken you but such as is common to man—God is faithful and will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to bear it.
 - b. Peter and David were delivered from evil after they had fallen
 - Peter by the Lord Jesus' prayer:
 - **Lu 22:32 "But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to *Me*, strengthen your brethren."**
 - David by Nathan the prophet who came to rebuke the king when he did not repent of his adultery and murder...
 - 2 Sam 12 begins with the words:
 - **2 Sam 12:1: And the LORD sent Nathan unto David.**

TRANS> Related to this...

3. He surrounds us with people to support and encourage us
 - a. He sends friends along at just the right time as He sent Titus to Paul
 - **2 Co 7:6 Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus**
 - b. He even prepares people through trials to be a comfort to others in trials.
 - **2 Cor 1:3-5: Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the**

sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.

- c. In Matthew 4, Jesus was tested in the wilderness...
 - but then the angels came to comfort Him
4. He preserves us by restraining our enemies, confounding them, removing them, and subduing them.
 - **Rom 16:20: And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you.**
 - Whether this was a specific promise to the Romans, I cannot say, but we know that in the end and whenever necessary, God crushes Satan so that he cannot harm us.
 - In the end, He will remove all our enemies:
 - **1 Cor 15:54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”**
5. He changes our hearts (effectual calling, new birth, sanctification)
 - a. We could never continue in His way but for His transformation of us
 - **Ezekiel 36, 25 “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*.”**
 - b. With the new heart He gives us, we do not depart from him...
 - **1Jo 3:9: Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.**
 - c. He will continue in His work in us until it is done:
 - **Phil 1:6: being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;**

II. Now let’s discuss various ways in which God governs

A. First, see how he governs by legislation—He is the lawgiver:

1. He does this by means of His word
 - His commandments...as in Exodus 20
 - His ordinances...like the Lord’s Supper and worship on the Lord’s Day...

2. He legislates by means of His ministers

- by the civil magistrate
 - **Romans 13:1: Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.**
 - God has appointed them to rule over you in the land.
- by parents
 - **Eph 6:1: Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.**
 - God has appointed them to rule over you in the house.
- by elders (Heb 13),
 - **Heb 13:17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.**

B. He governs us by leading us to where He wants us to be (in the outworking of his decrees) through various means:

1. He leads by means of conscience

- This is a rule that God uses that is built right into us...
 - The LORD uses it for His purposes...
- Sometimes, he keeps you from doing things by giving you a conscience about it (through his providential working)
 - Romans 14- holding principle—if in doubt, don't do it
- This is even the case with unbelievers:
 - **Ro 2:15 who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*)**

2. He leads us by means of Satan (the lying spirit)

- He uses Satan to lead men to do certain things.
 - **1 Kings 22:21-23 “Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, and said, ‘I will persuade him.’ The LORD said to him, ‘In what way?’ So he said, ‘I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And the LORD said, ‘You shall persuade *him*, and also prevail. Go out and do so.’ Therefore look! The LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours, and the LORD has declared disaster against you.”**
- He even led David in this way:

- **2Sa 24:1** Again the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel, and He moved David against them to say, “Go, number Israel and Judah.”
- **1Ch 21:1** Now Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel.

C. He governs us by circumstances (puts us where He wants us to be for His purposes)

1. He gives you your situation in life

- your wealth
 - **De 8:17-18** “then you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.’ And you shall remember the LORD your God, for *it is* He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as *it is* this day.”
- your power
 - Romans 9: Pharaoh—to show his power,
 - David-
 - **2Sa 7:7** “Wherever I have moved about with all the children of Israel, have I ever spoken a word to anyone from the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?’ ”

2. He gives you birth place (Psalm 87:5),

3. He appoints your time in history

- Esther- such a time as this
- **Ga 4:4** But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law,

D. He governs you by judgements and rewards

1. administered by others

- governors (sword- Noah, Romans 13),
- parents (rod and reproof give wisdom),
- elders (Matt 18),
- peers (Lev- rebuke, glad acceptance on the other),

2. administered in nature-

- Amos 4:6-12 (sickness, famine, accidents, prosperity)—
- **Proverbs 12:24:** The hand of the diligent will rule, but the lazy man will be put to forced labor.

3. administered in heart

- guilt—Psalm 32;
- terror—one thousand flee at one;
- comfort & assurance—2 Tim—I know whom I have believed, peace—
- peace:
 - **Ps 119:165: Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble.**