

Session Four: Providence

Understanding *Providence* and understanding why those hard questions like “why do bad things happen?” render us speechless when we should speak?

Overview of Course:

'Flowers, Dead People, and Tending Sheep' or What it means to live out Reformed Theology in the 21st Century by being a Presbyterian, PCA."

The focus of this class looks at the historical and theological underpinnings of what it means to be PCA in the 21st century. We will go back and look at Calvinist and Puritan theology, many times represented as flowers, as a means of explaining our core doctrine. We will explore the writings of "dead men", Calvinist, Reformed, Presbyterian theologians whose wisdom of the past brings us life in the 21st century. And finally we will look at what does it mean to be a Reformed Church as it relates to Biblical church government and being shepherds. The framework of the class will come from the following four books of the series: Basics of the Reformed Faith--(1) What is a true Calvinist? (Ryken), (2) What is Grace? (Lucas), (3) What is Providence (Derek), and (4) What is a Reformed Church (Smallman). Further background from the Presbyterian Primer, Historical Roots of the PCA and Biblical Church Government (Clements) will be used.

Big Questions of the class:

1. What is a Reformed world view? What is a Calvinist mind?
2. How does this knowledge influence us in the 21st century?
3. How do I live out my faith into the workplace and world?

Structure:

1. Look at what Reformed theologians have said in the past as guides for living.
2. How we can live from Scripture.
3. Applications to daily life and big questions of life.
4. Glorify God.

Review from Weeks One-Three:

1. As Reformed believers do we live out life in gratitude vs. life in servitude? “...the true Calvinist has a mind that is centered on God’s majesty, a spirit that is sorry for sin, a heart that is full of gratitude for God’s grace, and a will that submits to His holy purpose”
2. As Reformed believers living in the conditions spelled out in 2 Peter 1:5-15, how do we live out our life because we claim assurance of salvation?
3. As Reformed believers do we claim the Sovereignty of God when the world seeks to “overwhelm”? Do we claim “God is God.”

Today: God’s Providence

Review: Sovereignty and Providence: 1 Timothy 6: 11-16

Etymology of Providence: [Latin: *pro*=before, in front of *videre/videntia*=to see, or foreknowledge; *Providence* (capitalized), c. 1600, “God as a beneficent caretaker”]

Shorter Catechism: Question 11

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, and all their actions.

Derek W. H. Thomas

Professor systemic and practical theology at RTS, at 1st Presbyterian, Columbia, S.C.

“...It only requires one errant molecule in the universe to question the certainty of the future and unless we can be assured that *everything* is submissive to God’s sovereign rule, there is always the possibility that the future may not be as we have believed it to be.”

Q: Why do we “expect” the world to be a certain way?

WCF 5.1, 2,3

1. God the great Creator of all things doth uphold (Neh. 9:6, Ps. 145:14-16, Heb. 1:3) direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, (Dan. 4:34-35, Ps 135:6, Acts 1:25-28, Job 38: 1-41, 34) from the greatest to the least, (Matt. 10:29-31) by his most wise and holy providence, (Prov. 15:18, 2 Chron. 16:9, Ps. 104:24, Ps. 145:17) according to his

infallible, foreknowledge, (Acts 15:18, Isa. 42:9, Ezek. 11:5) and the free and immutable counsel of his own will (Eph. 1:11, Ps. 33:10-11) to the praise of the glory of his wisdom. 2. Although in relations to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably and fallibly; (Acts 2:23, Isa. 14:24, 27) yet, by the same providence, he ordereth to fall out, according to the nature of the second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently. (Gen. 8:22, Jer. 31:35, Isa. 10:6-7, Ex. 21:13, Deut. 19:5, 1 Kings 22:28-34). 3. God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, (Acts 27:24, 31, 44, Isa. 55:10-11) yet is free to work without (Hos. 1:7, Matt. 4:4, Job 34:20) above, (Rom 4:19-21) and against them at his pleasure. (2 Kings 6:6, Dan. 3:27)

Derek Thomas continued: *“Few things distinguish Christian and secular world views with greater clarity than the doctrine of providence. This doctrine insists that everything that happens does so because God wills it to happen, wills it to happen before it happens, wills it to happen in the way that it happens... Providence suggests God’s care of the world, both his supervision of all events and circumstances and his provision for all of our needs. It is more than God’s ability to “see” into the future; it his active and determined care to ensure that what he has promised for us actually does come to pass.”*

Story of Ruth: Providence in a macro/micro view (macro: God providing for the line of the Messiah, micro: care for a Moabite woman in a hostile world)

Q: If we claim God’s foreknowledge, what do we have to give up?

Other views of Providence, which are not from the Reformed, Presbyterian (PCA), classical perspective:

1. *simple divine foreknowledge (Arminian):* God chooses on the basis of a certain choice made by man
2. *simple divine foreknowledge (Molinism):* God knows all possible outcomes from an infinite array of possibilities and this allows for creatures to freely choose their own will that can bring about God’s purpose
3. *non-omniscient God (Open Theism):* God knows everything possible about the future for which it is logically possible for Him to know (God knows the past and the present but not the future in the same way)

WCF Chapter 5.4

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; (Isa 45:7, Rom. 11:32-34, 2 Sam. 16:10, Acts 2:23, 4:27=28; 1 Chron. 21:1, 1 Kings 22:22-23, 1 Chron. 10:4, 13-14) and that not by a bare permission, (John 12:40, 2 Thess. 2:11) but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding (limiting), (Ps. 76:10, 2 Kings 19:28) and otherwise ordering and governing them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; (Gen. 50:20, Isa. 10:12, 13-15) 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 of approver of sin. (James 1:13-14, 17, 1 John 2:16, Ps. 50:21)

WCF Chapter 5.5, 6 (Modern English Study Version)

5. The most wise, righteous, and gracious God often leaves his own children, for a time, to manifold temptations and to the corruption of their own hearts. He does this to chastise them for their past sins, to humble them by making them aware of the hidden strength of the corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, and then to raise them to a closer, more constant dependence upon himself for their support, to make them more watchful against all future occasions for sinning, and to fulfill various other just and holy purposes. 6. As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous judge, blinds and hardens because of their past sins, God withholds his grace, by which their minds might have been enlightened and their hearts affected. He also sometimes takes away the gifts which they had, and exposes them to such things as their corrupt nature makes into occasions for sinning. Moreover, he gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan, by which they harden themselves even under the same means which God uses to soften others.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) *The Providence of God (Sermon 1299)*

“...If it should be further objected that if God’s true aim in these outward benefits of providence, which have the appearances of favor, be real favors to mankind, and so that the true happiness of mankind should be the consequence, one would think it would have the same effect in all places where those blessings are bestowed.

I answer that it will not follow. God may grant things in all parts of the world, the main design of which may evidently be the benefit of mankind, and yet not have that effect in all places where they are given. As the main design of Him who orders the existence of rain in the world, is making the earth fruitful, yet it does not follow that he designed this should actually be the effect in all parts of the globe where the rain falls. For it falls on the sea as well as the dry land, which is more than one half of the globe. But yet there it cannot answer this intention.”

Q: How do we address the question, ‘Why does God allow bad things to happen to people?’

Innocent Suffering

“Sinners suffer”—if that is true, only, was Jesus a sinner because he certainly suffered at the hands of others and Satan

“Cause of the curse of Genesis 3”: **John 9: 1-3** ¹*As he passed by, he saw man blind from birth.* ²*And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”* ³*Jesus answers, “It was not that man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”*

Acts 9: 24-31 Believers prayer for boldness (not a resigning to whatever happens)

John Flavel (1627-1691) *The Mystery of Providence* (published in 1678)

English Presbyterian clergyman and author

Do not pry too curiously into the secrets of Providence, nor allow your shallow reason arrogantly to judge and censure its designs. There are hard texts in the works as well as in the Word of God. It becomes us modestly and humbly to reverence, but not to dogmatize too boldly and positively upon them. A man may easily get a strain by over-reaching. ‘When I thought to know this,’ said Asaph, ‘it was too painful for me’ ([Psalm 73:16](#)). ‘I thought to know this’ - there was the arrogant attempt of reason, there he pried into the arcana of Providence - ‘but it was too wonderful for me,’ it was ‘useless labour,’ as Calvin expounds it. He pried so far into that puzzling mystery of the afflictions of the righteous and prosperity of the wicked, till it begat envy towards them and despondency in himself ([Psalm 73:3, 13](#)), and this was all he got by summoning Providence to the bar of reason. Holy Job was guilty of this evil, and frankly ashamed of it ([Job 42:3](#)).

Philip Graham Ryken

President of Wheaton College

The fact that God is sovereign means that all things, including our sufferings, serve to fulfill his ultimate purpose and to bring glory to himself. When trouble comes, the true Calvinist assumes from the outset that God is in control and that He will accomplish his good purpose in the end.

Derek Thomas continued: *In the end, the doctrine of God’s providence is a call to us to trust in God... What this says to us is that no matter how dark things may appear to be, we must reckon with the invisible hand of God that works in all things (Romans 8:28-30). As God’s children, we may not always appreciate **what** it is that God may be doing in our lives; but we are to trust that in every aspect of it God is fulfilling the best of plans that ultimately will be for our good...At the heart of this view of providence, then is the need to place our trust entirely into his government and care.”*

Abraham Kuyper

“There is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’”

Q: If God is sovereign, and we claim the Providence of God, then doesn’t it ultimately come back to our recognition of that sovereignty and therefore call us to minister to those suffering and in need and to speak “God is in control and that ‘he will accomplish his good purpose in the end?’ Why are we afraid of that and sometimes feel that is not enough?

Review (Ryken): [from *What is a true Calvinist: Basics of the Reformed Faith Series*, pg. 29]

“...the true Calvinist has a mind that is centered on God’s majesty, a spirit that is sorry for sin, a heart that is full of gratitude for God’s grace, and a will that submits to his holy purpose. In other words, the true Calvinist is a person whose whole person and entire life are dedicated to the glory of God. The true Calvinist not only recognizes God’s glory but is also jealous to promote it.”

NEXT WEEK: So if we claim man’s chief end, our assurance of salvation, God’s sovereignty, and God’s providence—What does it mean to be jealous to promote God’s glory and live out our distinctives as a Reformed, Presbyterian (PCA) church?