

TEACHING THROUGH THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Chapter 5: Of Providence

LESSON 008

STUDENT HANDOUT

How God Runs the World

§ 5.1-3

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. Genesis 50:20

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 5.1-3

1. 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.
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.
3. God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, how would you summarize how God runs the world, and how does that differ from the common idea that He simply wound up creation and stepped back to let it run on its own?
2. We are going to be sinned against and it is going to hurt. How does knowing that God is the first cause of all things comfort you even in the midst of being hurt?
3. God is a “God of means,” ordinarily working through creation, medicine, and human effort rather than suspending natural laws. Why do you think we often fail to recognize God’s hand at work in these everyday, ordinary processes?
4. If God has already determined the outcome of all things, why do our prayers still genuinely matter? How should seeing prayer as God’s chosen means to bring about His purposes change the way we pray?

Providence and Sin

§ 5.4

For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. Acts 4:27–28

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 5.4

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; 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.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does the Confession take such care to say that God’s involvement with sin is “not by a bare permission”? What is the danger of thinking God merely “permitted” sin without ordaining or bounding it?
2. The greatest evil ever committed in human history was the betrayal, trial, and crucifixion of the sinless Son of God. How does Acts 4:27–28 illustrate the exact doctrine taught in WCF 5.4?
3. God restrains evil, but it doesn’t always feel like that. What are some historical examples that make it clear that God restrains evil?
4. How do you answer someone who claims: “If God ordained that sin would happen, then He must be to blame for it, and it’s unfair to hold me accountable”?

Providence for the Believer and Unbeliever

§ 5.5-7

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. Romans 8:28–30

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 5.5-7

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why would God deliberately withdraw His restraining help and allow a true believer to actually stumble and fall into serious sin?
2. How does God “harden” the wicked without being the author of their sin?
3. How do you see the contrast between David under Nathan’s rebuke and Pharaoh under Moses’ plagues? What was the difference between those two men?
4. Why does it matter that God is particularly working all things to bless the church?



LESSON CONTENT



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