

TEACHING THROUGH THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Chapter 5: Of Providence

LESSON 008

TEACHER NOTES

REVIEW FROM PREVIOUS LESSON

God freely created the world and everything in it, out of nothing in the space of six days and because He did that, He has absolute control over everything in all creation. The capstone of His creation was man, the only thing made in the image of God. God made all things good, and it was only the sin of Adam that brought this world under the curse and made what was very good into bad.

How God Runs the World

TEACHING NOTE

God is the creator of all things, but He does not just create and then step back and watch the world run. He is actively involved in guiding every part of His creation. Yet, His intimate involvement with creation does not take away human freedom, choice or responsibility, but rather He ordains all things in a way that establishes our freedom and responsibility. This is part of God's character and the way that He has chosen to design things and create.

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.

TEACHING CONTENT

God Controls All Things: We have to remember, fundamentally, that God is not part of creation. He is the eternal creator who always is and always was. When we remember that it is easier to comprehend that everything in all creation from the smallest to the biggest is completely within His power and under His control. And He is freely in control, in the same way the clay makes no demands on the potter of how it should be formed, so God shapes and molds and guides all creation for the good of His people and His own glory. **God the First Cause:** The answer to every version of “why did this happen?” is “because God willed it;” that is completely true and yet not the whole story. God is the first cause of all things, He is the ultimate reason why everything happens, and yet He has designed all of creation so that things happen according to secondary causes as well. That means if someone punches you it was God’s sovereign will for that to happen but that God sovereignly ordained for that person to freely choose, with no compulsion other than their own character and desires, to punch you. The person punching you isn’t a robot, he made the choice that he wanted to make and so he is accurately called the second cause of your getting punched and is fully responsible for it.

The Use of Means: God is a God of means, He doesn’t create a tree floating in space, He makes the rain and the sun and wind and earth and the dirt and the forest and the planet to hold the forest and then governs all of it so that that one tree can grow and prosper. So we can also say, as a second cause: “Why did this tree grow? Because it got a lot of rain and sunshine.” God is the first cause, rain and sunshine and circumstances are the second cause. That is important because even though God can work without, above, or against means, such as miraculously raising someone from the dead, He ordinarily works through doctors and medicine to extend someone’s life. This is why we pray, not just because it is good for our hearts to bring our requests to God, but because God loves to use the means of our prayers to bring about His desired ends.

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?**

This is going to differ from person to person, but the main points would be: God is completely in control and man is completely responsible for their actions. God is in no way the author of evil, but He uses evil men and their wicked intentions to bring about His sovereign ends. God is in control.

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?**

Just like Joseph said to his brothers, we can confess that even though they meant it for evil, God meant it for our good and His glory. Moreover, it should remind us that God is not powerless against anything. He could have stopped anything he wanted to stop. If something happened, it’s because God had a purpose for it. The sinner is still responsible for their sin, but they are also instruments in God’s hands to bless us.

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?**

Because we tend to think of second causes as completely independent from the first cause. The interaction of a sovereign God and a free creation is a mystery that is impossible for us to truly comprehend, and so on a day-to-day basis we flatten and simplify. That is why it is so important for a Christian to be thoughtful and to meditate on the scriptures and on their lives so that they can give thanks to God for things He did yesterday and 10 years ago that didn’t make any sense at the time but that make more sense based on what ends He achieved through them.

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?**

We should pray believing what God has taught us about prayer, that He listens and that it changes things. To believe that God listens to prayer and uses it is not to deny God’s sovereignty or his eternal plan, but rather to assert that God uses our prayers sovereignly in order to bring about His intended ends. Put differently, if God intends to save someone, He typically ordains people to pray for that man before he is saved and then answers those prayers.

Providence and Sin

TEACHING NOTE

God is in complete control of all things, both good and evil. God is not a powerless bystander to the evil of men and angels, but actively restrains it and uses it to accomplish His own holy ends. God hates sin, and though He uses it, He is in no way guilty for the sin that men and angels freely choose. God is good and is working a good thing even through the actions of evil men.

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

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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.

TEACHING CONTENT

God Ordained Sin: This is one of the most nuanced and complex doctrines in all of Scripture. We must think rightly about sin and evil, or we will misunderstand creation and human nature. God ordained both the first fall of man and angels into sin and all subsequent sins. He did not merely give man bare permission to fall into sin but decreed it from eternity past. It was not a failure of God's plan or something outside of His control, but part of His eternal plan for His own holy ends. **God is not the Author of Sin:** Yet, it is equally important to affirm that though God ordained that sin would come to pass, God is in no way the author or approver of sin. God is holy, wise, just and good and bears no guilt for sin. Sinfulness comes only from the creature; men and angels freely chose to sin and bear all responsibility for that choice. **God Restrains Sin:** An important element to keep in mind of all of this is that God hates sin. Common grace is incredibly strong evidence of that truth. Why can a wicked man love his wife and raise a large family of children? Because God restrains that man's evil, He does not let sinners run wild with their darkest desires and intentions, but bounds them in and restrains them, ordering and governing their actions to that they ultimately accomplish God's sovereignly directed purposes.

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?**

If we seek to protect God's holiness by saying that He merely 'allowed' sin without 'ordaining' it then what we have done is protected God's holiness by destroying His sovereignty. God is holy AND sovereign. He ordained sin BY allowing it, but did so in such a way that He is absolutely not guilty for 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?**

The guilt for the crucifixion of Christ was on the hands of the priests, scribes, pharisees, roman officials, and citizens of Jerusalem. It was a wicked act, by wicked men. But it was a wicked act, by wicked men decreed from eternity past by our Holy God to bring about His own perfect and good ends. He used the sin of man to bring about the salvation of men.

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?**

Wicked nations don't last forever. Wicked people don't prosper forever. Nations that conquer and oppress other nations end up themselves conquered and oppressed. Society will embrace some evil and then that evil will weaken them and lead to their own destruction.

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"?**

God is holy and we are not robots. If you ate a donut this morning, it was because God ordained it from eternity past, but you still freely chose to eat it. No one forced you to eat the donut, eating it was the natural conclusion of your character, personality, and circumstances and you are responsible for eating it. The same is true for our sins. Ultimately God decreed our every action from eternity past, but in the course of history we also freely chose them. We cannot blame God for wicked things that we choose to do.

Providence for the Believer and Unbeliever

TEACHING NOTE

God is so fully and completely in control of all things that He even uses our own internal sinful corruption to bless His people and to harden His enemies in their rebellion against Him. He uses grace and seasons without clear grace in order to bring about good and blessing for His people.

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

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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.

TEACHING CONTENT

God Leaves Us to Our Own Devices: In the same way that God uses the sinful actions of others to bless us, God will sometimes hold back on restraining our sin in order to bless us by the consequences. Think of David and Bathsheba. David was clearly to blame at every stage, it was a great and wicked sin, but God's end goal was to bless and sanctify David and bring about the line of promise through Solomon, the son of Bathsheba. God allowed David to fall into his own personal temptations and corruption in order to chip away at that very temptation and corruption in David. David was a better man at the end of his life than he was at the beginning, because God worked in him.

God Leaves Them to Their Own Devices: For believers God withholds his restraint for a season to bless them, for unbelievers God withholds His restraint for a season to harden them in their rebellion. Put differently, when Nathan confronted David and said "You are the man!" It broke David's heart, he realized his sin and repented. An unbeliever in the same situation may go as far as feeling sorry about his actions and making some attempt at restitution, but he never truly repents of his sins before God. He would continue to believe that he was right and that the world was wrong, that God was wrong, like Pharaoh when his heart was hardened by God's plagues against Egypt. **God**

Shepherds His Sheep: God controls all things, but most of all He controls them to build up, bless, and protect His people. Christ shed His blood not for the world generally, but for His people, the church, specifically. If God had not willed to save anyone, then He would have destroyed all creation when Adam sinned. Rather He chose to delay judgment in order to save a people for Himself, and so He works all things primarily for that end of gathering in His sheep.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Why would God deliberately withdraw His restraining help and allow a true believer to actually stumble and fall into serious sin?**

God is a good father and a good shepherd, and He knows what we need. Some sins can be dealt with in times of peace, but other sins can only be mortified in times of war. They are so entrenched that we need a shock to system in order to realize how bad they are and to repent of them. In those circumstances, what is best for us is to be left to our own devices so that we realize the ugliness of our own sin and repent of them.

2. **How does God "harden" the wicked without being the author of their sin?**

We have to remember that they are hardening themselves, "even under those means which God useth for the softening of others." So in other words, these are the means of grace, but wicked men hate God and hate His grace and so they twist all things towards their rebellion and harden their hearts against God even when they are given the opportunity to repent.

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?**

The key difference between those two men is that one was saved by grace and one wasn't. David came to repentance as a result of those events, whereas Pharaoh just hated God and his people even more.

4. **Why does it matter that God is particularly working all things to bless the church?**

We really, really don't need to fear anything in this world. Even the most well thought out schemes of wicked men God is using in order to bless and build up His people. That doesn't mean we're always going to be happy and win every battle, but it means that God has won the war and so even our seeming defeats are bricks in the wall of our ultimate victory in Christ.

References — Chapter 5

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Glossary — Chapter 5

A note on these definitions: this glossary was compiled with the help of AI, drawing on a number of sources. I am not the author of these definitions and do not claim them as my own work. They are offered as a study aid; Scripture and the Westminster Standards remain the authority.

Absolute —God is most absolute in that He depends upon nothing outside Himself and is bound by nothing but His own perfect nature. He is not conditioned, limited, or determined by any external thing, for all things derive from Him while He derives from none. His being and His decrees rest entirely upon His own free and sovereign will.

Angels and Men —The two kinds of rational creatures included in God’s decree of predestination. The Confession teaches that “some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death,” and that their number is so certain it cannot be increased or diminished. God kept the elect angels from falling, while the other angels fell by their own choice. God’s decree reaches over all His rational creatures, in heaven and on earth.

Author of Sin —The one who originates sin and bears the guilt of it. The Confession insists that although God ordains whatsoever comes to pass, He neither is nor can be “the author or approver of sin.” The sinfulness of every sin “proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God.” God ordains that sin will come to pass, but man freely chooses it and is fully responsible for it.

Bare Permission —The mistaken idea that God merely allows sin to happen without ordaining, bounding, or governing it. The Confession denies this, teaching that God’s providence extends even to sin, “not by a bare permission” but with “a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them.” God is never a helpless bystander, and yet He is never the author of sin. He rules over evil without doing evil.

Chastisement —God’s fatherly discipline of His children, meant for their correction and good rather than their punishment. The Confession teaches that God sometimes leaves His own children to temptation and the corruption of their own hearts, “to chastise them for their former sins” and to humble them. God’s chastening is proof of His love: “the Lord disciplines the one he loves” (Hebrews 12:6).

Common Grace —God’s non-saving favor shown to all humanity, restraining sin, maintaining societal order, and enabling culture.

Confession —The public declaration or formal written summary of biblical doctrines and convictions held by believers and the church.

Contingency —That which could happen or not happen, depending on other circumstances. To God “nothing is contingent or uncertain,” for He knows and ordains all things. Yet the Confession says the contingency of second causes is not taken away but established: in our experience things really do depend on circumstances and choices. What is uncertain to us is always certain to God.

Decree —God’s eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, by which He has freely and unchangeably ordained whatsoever comes to pass. The decree is not a reaction to anything in time but the plan by which all of time unfolds. It includes not only the ends God intends but every means by which He brings them about, and it never makes God the author of sin or does violence to the will of the creature.

Deism —The false belief that God created the world like a clockmaker winding a clock and then stepped back to let it run on its own. Scripture and the Confession teach the opposite: God continually upholds, directs, disposes, and governs all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least. God did not just make the world; He holds it together moment by moment.

Depravity —The general corruption and moral ruin of human nature resulting from the Fall.

Doctrine —The body of authoritative biblical teachings and foundational principles of the Christian faith.

First Cause —God Himself as the ultimate source and reason for everything that comes to pass. Nothing happens apart from His will, power, and decree. Yet God has chosen to bring most things about through second causes, so that both statements are true at once: it rained because God willed it, and it rained because the clouds were full. God is the first cause; the creature is never the first cause, but it is a real cause.

Foreknowledge —God’s perfect knowledge of all things before they come to pass. God knows “whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions,” yet He has not decreed anything “because he foresaw it as future.” God does not look ahead to see what His creatures will do and then decide; rather, the future is certain because He has decreed it. God does not foreknow because things will happen; things will happen because God has foreordained them.

Foreordination —God’s eternal appointment of what will come to pass, both the ends and the means. The Confession teaches that God has “fore-ordained all the means” by which He brings His elect to glory. To ordain is not merely to foresee or permit, but to determine with purpose. What God has foreordained is certain, and it comes to pass in the course of history through ordinary means and genuine human choices.

Free Will —The natural liberty God has given to man’s will, so that it is never forced by God or by nature to do good or evil, but chooses according to its own desires. God’s decree does not take this liberty away. Our ability to choose what is spiritually good, however, depends on our condition: Adam was able not to sin, fallen man is not able not to sin, and the believer is freed by grace to will and do what is good. We always choose freely, but we choose according to what we are.

Glorification —The final stage of salvation. At death, the souls of believers are made perfect in holiness and immediately pass into glory; at the resurrection, their bodies are raised in glory and reunited to their souls. Then they will be made perfectly blessed in the full enjoyment of God to all eternity. Glorification is certain for every believer, for “those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:30).

Grace —God’s unmerited favor toward sinners; His free gift of salvation and divine enablement that cannot be earned or deserved.

Hardening —God’s righteous judgment on the wicked in which He withholds His softening grace, removes restraints, and gives them over to their own sinful desires. God does not put new evil into anyone’s heart; the wicked “harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.” Pharaoh is the great example: God hardened his heart, and Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Hardening is always just, for it is a judgment upon sin already loved.

Immutable —Unchangeable in His being, perfections, purposes, and promises. God neither grows nor diminishes, neither learns nor forgets, neither improves nor decays, for He is already and eternally perfect. His immutability is the ground of all confidence in His Word, since what He has decreed and promised can never alter.

Infallible —Where inerrancy speaks to the factual accuracy of the original manuscripts, infallibility speaks to the Bible’s complete trustworthiness as our guide for faith and life. Because God cannot deceive, His Word will never mislead us, though we may certainly mislead ourselves through careless or faithless reading of it.

Justification —An act of God’s free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

Manifold —Many and various. When the Confession says the true sense of Scripture “is not manifold, but one,” it means each passage has one true meaning, not many competing meanings. A “manifold dispensation” means God’s governing of things in many different ways, and “manifold temptations” means temptations of many kinds.

Mortification —The active, Spirit-empowered putting to death of sin and sinful desires in the believer’s life.

Omnipotence —God’s infinite power, by which He is able to do all His holy will. God is “almighty,” and nothing is too hard for Him. His omnipotence is never arbitrary; He cannot lie, cannot sin, and cannot deny Himself, because He always acts in perfect harmony with His own holy nature. His power is the believer’s comfort, because the God who loves us is able to keep us.

Ordinary Means of Grace —The primary outward instruments ordained by God—principally the Word, sacraments, and prayer—through which the Holy Spirit works salvation and spiritual growth in believers.

Ordinary Providence —God’s usual way of governing the world through means, such as rain to grow crops, medicine to heal, and preaching to save. The Confession teaches that God “in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.” When God works apart from or against ordinary means, as in a miracle, it is called extraordinary providence. Both are the work of the same sovereign God.

Predestination —God’s eternal decree concerning the everlasting destiny of men and angels. The Confession teaches that “some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death.” Predestination is one part of God’s larger decree of all things. It includes election, God’s free choice of some to salvation in Christ, and reprobation, His just passing by of others.

Providence —God’s continuous upholding, directing, and governing of all creation, creatures, and events according to His eternal decree and holy wisdom.

Repentance —An evangelical grace wherein a sinner, with true grief and hatred of sin, turns from sin to God with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.

Second Causes —The created causes through which God ordinarily works: the choices of men, the laws of nature, and the circumstances of life. God is the first cause of all things, yet He orders things to fall out “according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.” Rain truly makes the crops grow, and a man truly chooses what he does. God’s decree does not take these causes away but establishes them.

Sovereignty —God’s absolute, supreme, and unchallengeable authority and dominion over the entire universe.

Sundry —Various, of many kinds. When the Confession says God revealed Himself “at sundry times, and in divers manners,” it means at many different times and in many different ways, such as through prophets, dreams, and visions (Hebrews 1:1). “Sundry other just and holy ends” means various other purposes.

The Fall —The first sin of Adam and Eve, when they ate of the forbidden tree and broke the covenant of works. Because Adam stood as the representative of all mankind, the guilt of that sin is imputed to his posterity and the corruption of it is passed on to every person born by ordinary generation. Creation itself was subjected to the curse. The fall did not take God by surprise; it was ordained for His holy ends, yet it was entirely man’s doing.

The Son —The second person of the Trinity, eternally begotten of the Father, who became incarnate as Jesus Christ to accomplish redemption and now reigns at the Father’s right hand.

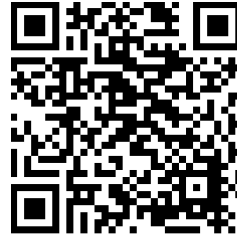
Vivification —The second part of sanctification, the counterpart of mortification. Mortification is dying to sin; vivification is coming alive to righteousness. By the Spirit, believers are “more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness.”

Westminster Confession of Faith —The confession of faith written by the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s and published in 1647. It is a summary of the system of doctrine taught in Scripture, organized in thirty-three chapters, and it serves, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as the doctrinal standard of Presbyterian churches such as the PCA. It is a subordinate standard, always under the authority of Scripture.

Withal —Old English for “in addition” or “at the same time.” When the Confession says God is merciful “and withal most just and terrible in his judgments,” it means God is both at once. His mercy and His justice are never in tension.



LESSON CONTENT



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