

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 10: Providence and Contentment

Last time: *God gives us free will. Our sinful nature, however, corrupts that will. God's predestination is hopeful news to those who cannot save themselves. It doesn't discourage us from evangelism; it gives us confidence in its effectiveness.*

God's Providence and Miracles

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 5

5.1 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.

Nature

Why does the WCF begin its section on providence by describing God as “the Great Creator of all things”?

Heb. 1:3 God “*upholds the universe by the word of his power.*”

What do natural laws tell us about God's role in sustaining creation? What is it about natural laws that help us understand a rational God?

Secondary Causes

WCF 5.2 *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.*

God is the first cause of all that comes to pass. What is an example of secondary causes? What does it mean by “necessarily, freely, or contingently”?

Miracles

How do you define a miracle? What about these: The birth of a child, the beauty of a sunset, God orchestrating events to get you the perfect job, the Phillies winning the World Series.

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

Two Common Categories

1. Coincidences: Improbable or unexpected circumstances that don't run against common principles of nature.
2. Violations of the law of nature: Events that are impossible according to nature but that really happened.

The second is not more divine than the first. God is free to work through means, even human choices that happened decades ago to bring about his purpose. He has always been in control, guiding the events of history.

If this is true, then why would God even need or use miracles?

- **Deuteronomy 13:1ff**, If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods," (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them", you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams... (See Mt.24:24 & Mk.13:22)
- **Mark 16:20**, "And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it."

Calvin: *"Miracles strengthen the authority of God's messengers. Now these very numerous and remarkable miracles which he relates are so many confirmations of the law that he has delivered and of the doctrine that He has published."* (Institutes, 1.8.5)

Implications:

1. You can't separate the prophet's message from the "signs" (miracles) that authenticate that the messenger. You can't separate the teaching of Jesus from his activity as an exorcist, healer, and worker of signs and wonders. He was not just an enlightened humanitarian. In what ways did Jesus' miracles fit with his message?
2. The Christian faith is a faith vindicated by miracles which did occur in time.
3. The miracle itself is not alone sufficient to vindicate a message. The message itself must be consistent to prior revelations already verified by God. (Dt. 13)

Christian Contentment

1. Get big picture interpretation right.

Our study of providence has told us that God governs all things for his purpose. Because of this, we can know for sure that our suffering is not random or meaningless.

We may not know the immediate reasons why God is bringing times of difficulty into your life, but we do know the ultimate reason why this is happening.

WCF 5.7 *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.*

How are we sure of the ultimate for Christians?

Romans 8:31–32 *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

2. Fearing the Future

We seek to control the things out of our control in a way that becomes toxic to us.

"From your daily bread to your abilities and opportunities these are gifts from God that you don't control. What happens when you attempt to ensure that you will not get sick and die? You become obsessed with diet and exercise, or fearful that any nagging pain might be the one that gets you. What happens when you are obsessed with getting people to like you? You become flirtatious or artificial, a coward or a deceiver, a chameleon or a recluse. What happens when you live for success in career or family achievement? You always come to an end." David Powlison

We set ourselves up for discontentment when we long for comfort:

“when the heart of a man has nothing to do, but to be busy about creature-comforts, every little thing troubles him; but when the heart is taken up with the weighty things of eternity, with the great things of eternal life, the things of here below that disquieted it before are things now of no consequence to him in comparison with the other-how things fall out here is not much regarded by him, if the one thing that is necessary is provided for.”

— **Jeremiah Burroughs**

Our anxiety about the future causes us to lack contentment in the present. We are intimidated by all that is on our plate. But, we rarely look back at busy seasons in life and account for how God guided us through it.

“Indeed, our afflictions may be heavy, and we cry out, Oh, we cannot bear them, we cannot bear such an affliction. Though you cannot tell how to bear it with your own strength, yet how can you tell what you will do with the strength of Jesus Christ? You say you cannot bear it? So you think that Christ could not bear it? But if Christ could bear it why may you not come to bear it? You will say, Can I have the strength of Christ? Yes, it is made over to you by faith: the Scripture says that the Lord is our strength, God himself is our strength, and Christ is our strength. There are many Scriptures to that effect, that Christ's strength is yours, made over to you, so that you may be able to bear whatever lies upon you,”

— **Jeremiah Burroughs**

3. Facing your fears, worst case scenario

Many times our fears grow by ignoring them. It is best to discuss this with another Christian. Letting yourself explore all that the worst case might entail can rob those fears of their power. You often find that letting yourself imagine what life is like if those things come about can help you reprioritize what life is about.

4. Evils of a “murmuring spirit”

Oh, had I had this grace of contentment, what a happy life I might have lived! What abundance of honour I might have brought to the name of God! How might I have honoured my profession! What a great deal of comfort I might have enjoyed! But the Lord knows it has been far otherwise. Oh, how far have I been from this grace of contentment which has been expounded to me! I have had a murmuring, a vexing, and a fretting heart within me. Every little cross has put me out of temper and out of frame. Oh, the boisterousness of my spirit! What evil God sees in the vexing and fretting of my heart, and murmuring and repining of my spirit!

— **Jeremiah Burroughs**

What is a murmuring spirit? How can complaining or venting actually add to problem of a lack of contentment rather than relieve it?

What fuels your murmuring? What are alternatives to murmuring that don't simply ignore suffering or pretend darkness is light?

Connecting the Dots: Where Theology meets Life

Summary: God is in control of all things. He can perform miracles, but he is just as active and working through ordinary times and events. Understanding God's providence better will lead us to greater contentment.