

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 5: God's Providence
Applied to Suffering and Contentment

Opening Discussion:

When do you find yourself lacking contentment?

When you suffer, what do you try to look for in suffering?

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.

Proverbs 16:1 *"The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.*

Philippians 2:13 *"for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."*

Psalm 103:19 *"The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all."*

Acts 17:25-28, *"The God who make the world, and everything in it.. he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation... He is not far from every one of us; for in him we live, and move, and have our being..."*

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)

Suffering

Does reality of suffering undermine belief in God?

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; 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.

This section isn't an attempt to explain the origins of sin. It does assert, though, that God is in complete control of all things, even all sins. However, the sinfulness of these actions comes only from the sinner.

Genesis 50:20 "*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.*"

This is related to the question of suffer and God's goodness. The problem comes to a head when we identify the assumptions.

Consider the assumptions of a statement like: *A Perfectly good and all-powerful God would not allow evil.*

A good God would not allow evil. There is evil. Therefore, God cannot be good and all powerful. If God is not all powerful or all good or all knowing, then he cannot be God.

What is the assumption made about evil?

Let's reframe the problem: *A good God would not allow any utterly pointless evil.*

From this perspective, it now is a question of whether we will let our interpretation of suffering determine our theology or let our theology interpret our suffering.

Romans 5:3-5 *"... we exalt in hope of the glory of God, and not only this, but we also exalt in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*

Romans 8:18-25

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope (not utterly pointless subjecting), that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in Hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

1 Peter 1:6-7:

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in the praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 12:5-11:

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reproved by Him; For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline. But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons... He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*:

Beyond all doubt, His idea of "goodness" differs from ours... By the goodness of God we mean nowadays almost exclusively His Kindness. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we

happened to like doing, "What does it matter so long as they are contented?" We want, in fact, not so much a Father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven-- a senile benevolence... Kindness, merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering. It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms... If God is Love, He is by definition, something more than mere kindness. And it appears, from all records, that though He has often rebuked us with contempt, He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense.

There is no such thing under the divine government, or providence, as real chance or accident... This surely is a most cheering doctrine. What could be more gloomy than to believe that our dearest interests, even life itself, might lie at the mercy of blind or misguided chance? On the contrary, how consoling to know that nothing can befall us, nothing injure us, without the direction or permission of our heavenly Father!

Asbel Green

Is suffering a sign of God's anger? Is prosperity a sign of God's favor? What should a Christian expect?

Old Testament Expectations of Blessings and Curses

In the period of Israel's history when it was a theocracy (from Moses at Sinai to Jesus), God established a correlation between obedience and prosperity. Temporal (this world) blessing was a consequence of obedience to the Law and temporal curses were a punishment for sin. Believers were always eternally saved by faith in the coming Christ, but their earthly experiences of suffering and prosperity were tied to their obedience.

In the New Testament, this is flipped. We "suffer with him, in order that we be glorified with him." Suffering is the normal expectation for faithfully following Christ.

T. David Gordon:

"When our tradition teaches, as it so frequently does today, that there is essential continuity between the Sinai administration and the New Covenant administration on the issue of the relation between obedience and temporal prosperity, it places upon the shoulders of saints a burden which neither we nor our fathers could bear (e.g., fearing temporal sanctions as the result of disobedience). It repudiates, implicitly, the normativity of cross-bearing as an aspect of Christian discipleship. Implicitly, it repudiates the testimony of the inspired interpreters of our covenant, who perceived earthly affliction as evidence of divine favor ("Whom he loves, he chastens"). Implicitly, it repudiates the apostolic instruction that Christians who hope in Christ for this life are "of all men most to be pitied." Implicitly, it replaces the light yoke and easy burden of Christ with the heavy yoke and unbearable burden of the Sinai administration. And implicitly, it joins the chorus of Paul's Corinthian accusers, who denigrated his apostolic authority on the ground of his many sufferings, which very sufferings the apostle presented as proof to the contrary."

Mark 8:31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Acts 3:18 In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Acts 9:16 I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Phil. 1:29 For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but

of suffering for him as well

1Th. 2:14 For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews,

2Th. 1:5 This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering.

2Tim. 1:12 and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my

trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

Heb. 5:8 Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;

1Pet. 2:19 For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. 20 If you

endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

1Pet. 4:1 Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin),

1Pet. 4:19 Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.

1Pet. 5:10 And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

Rev. 2:10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

WCF 5.5 *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.*

Can we know certainly what God's specific purpose is for such "seasons"?

"In a clock, stop but one wheel and you stop every wheel, because they are dependent upon one other. So when God has ordered a thing for the present to be thus and thus, how do you know how many things depend upon this thing? God may have some work to do twenty years hence that depends on this passage of providence that falls out this day or this week."

— **Jeremiah Burroughs, The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment**

What is the difference between discipline and punishment? If you are a Christian, are you ever being punished? How does that change your understanding of your circumstances?

What about unbelievers?

WCF 5.6 *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.

How does this define God's act of judgment and the curse? What then is the ultimate 'curse' of hell in relation to this?

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?