

The Theology of the Westminster Standards WCF 5.5 – God’s Providence (Part 2)

“It is the apex of Christian piety to trust in God, just as it is also the foundation, to say, ‘I do not know, but I do know that God does.’ Christian piety leaves unresolved problems in the hand of God, remembering that, if we knew all, then we would be as God, and worship and adoration would be at an end. Clouds and darkness are round about him but justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne” – John Murray

I. Introduction: The Belgic Confession (1561)

We believe that this good God, after He had created all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to His holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without His orderly arrangement.

Yet God is not the author of, nor can be charged with, the sin that occurs. For His power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that He arranges and does his work very well and justly even when the devils and wicked men act unjustly.

We do not wish to inquire with undue curiosity into what he does that surpasses human understanding and is beyond our ability to comprehend. But in all humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, being content to be Christ’s disciples, so as to learn only what He shows us in His Word, without going beyond those limits.

This doctrine gives us unspeakable comfort since it teaches us that nothing can happen to us by chance but only by the arrangement of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures under his control, so that not one of the hairs on our heads (for they are all numbered) nor even a little bird can fall to the ground [Matt 10:29–30] without the will of our Father.

In this thought we rest, knowing that He holds in check the devils and all our enemies, who cannot hurt us without His permission and will. For that reason we reject the damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God involves Himself in nothing and leaves everything to chance.

(Art. 13 – *Doctrine of God’s Providence*)

II. Review WCF 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. (WCF 5.4)

A. God uses sin and evil to save lives.

1. **Gen 45:6–7, 50:20–21** – *“So Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come near to me, please.’ And they came near. And he said, ‘I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.’⁵ And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life ... 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.²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.”*
2. **Acts 2:23–24** – *“...this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.”*

B. God uses sin and evil to lead people to repentance.

1. **Luke 15:16–17** – “*And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father ...’*”

C. God uses sin and evil to display His power and grace.

1. **Rom 9:17** – “*For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’*”

D. “Balancing” Texts – See 1 John 2:16 and Ezek 18:23

III. **WCF 5.5 – God’s Hard Providence in the Lives of Christians**

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. (*WCF 5.5*)

- A. **Temporary** (“... for a season ...”) – **1 Pet 5:10** – “*And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.*”
- B. **Varied** (“... manifold temptations ...”) – **1 Pet 1:6** – “*In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials ...*”
- C. **Fatherly in Design** (“... to chastise them for their former sins ...”) [But remember Job!]
- D. **Illuminative in Intention** (“...or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled ...”) – **2 Chron 32:27, 29, 31** – “*And Hezekiah had very great riches and honor, and he made for himself treasuries for silver, for gold, for precious stones ... ²⁹ He likewise provided cities for himself, and flocks and herds in abundance, for God had given him very great possessions ... ³¹ And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart.*”
- E. **Transforming** (“... to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself ...”) – **2 Cor 12:7** – “*So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.*”
- F. **Mysterious** (“... and for sundry other just and holy ends.”) – **Ps 77:4, 7–10** – “*You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. ... ⁸ Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? ⁹ Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” ¹⁰ Then I said, “I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.”*

“*God has revealed his purposeful sovereignty over good and evil in order to humble human pride, intensify human worship, shatter human hopelessness, and put ballast in the battered boat of human faith, steel in the spine of human courage, gladness in the groans of affliction, and love in the heart that sees no way forward.*” – John Piper, *Providence*