

Systematic Theology: Providence

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Well, there are certain moments in life that you remember that stand out as particular times of understanding, perhaps of spiritual things that you have been thinking about for a long time, or other events that take place that really stand out in your mind. Tonight's topic reminds me of such a time in my own life many years ago. I was in the midst of life and raising my family and going through different job issues and all of that, and I was wrestling with the whole matter of wondering if I had made mistakes along the way and, you know, did I go right when I should have gone left in life, and what about this decision or that decision, and I was racked with second guessing of all of the things, all of the decisions that I had made with the exception of choosing to marry Nancy. Let me be quick to emphasize that. That was never a question. But all of the decisions about careers and education and people that you follow and all of that, I was just tortured with questions. Did I do the right thing? Does that explain some of the difficulties that I am in the midst of right now? And at the time, I was teaching through the Sermon on the Mount, this was many years ago and even as we are doing that now and dealing with issues in Matthew 6 that we will study soon enough on our Sunday morning time, but all of that condition of life and the studies of the time, brought me face to face with the doctrine of divine Providence and I remember so distinctly when it finally clicked for me the things that we are going to talk about this evening, I remember the exact moment when it clicked for me. I was driving on Bouquet Canyon in Santa Clarita, California, headed toward David's Way on my way to work that day, and suddenly it all became clear that divine Providence meant that I did not have to second guess any of my past decisions at all; that there was no need for regret, there was no need for sorrow, there was no need for wondering if I had missed the plan of God for my life because the answer was, no, I hadn't. The doctrine of divine Providence guaranteed that God had been working through all of those uncertain decisions to accomplish exactly what he wanted and to bring me to exactly the point that I was at at that time in my life. And it was like a great load was lifted off of my shoulders at that time and, beloved, as we come here tonight, maybe you have some of those same thoughts. Should I have done this? Should I have married So-and-so? Should I have made the decisions that I made?

Well, we all need to come back to the doctrine of divine Providence because it is in this doctrine that we are going to study tonight where Christians can find their absolute peace and assurance that God is always at work, he has always been at work, and he always will be at work. And even when you make what seems to be from a human perspective, a

mistake, an error in judgment, a foolish decision even, and you look back and say, "My life is bearing the consequences of my past foolish decisions," you can come back to the doctrine of divine Providence and say, "Do you know what? God was at work." And the consequence of all of it means this: as you are sitting here tonight, I'm kind of going to the end of my message at the beginning, but that's all right. We'll come back. We'll circle back to it at the end. As you sit here tonight, beloved, I want to assure you at the beginning of what we have to say tonight, that you have exactly the life today that God planned for you to have. It could be no other way if we believe the things that the Bible says about the sovereignty of God. And that means that what we are going to see tonight means that you can put to rest all of those "what if's" that dominate your life, "What if I had done it differently? What if I had done such and such instead?" Put away the past regrets and say, "Okay," you can kind of buck up, you can draw strength from the fact that God is always at work, he is always working out his plan and that going forward, you do not need to linger in worries or regrets about the past. Instead you can say, "This is what God has given me and now I can move forward from a position of strength." That is a great place for Christians to live. The fact of the matter is, is that it's exactly where God intends all of his children to live. We are to live in a confidence of the purposes of God. We are to live in an assurance that he causes all things to work together for good.

And let me just say, I'm already diverting from my notes so we might as well just go for it, shall we not? Let me say this: that when I counsel people over the years, you know, this is just a common theme in counseling, I always grieve when the doctrine of divine Providence is brought to their attention in the midst of their depression or their discouragement or their unhappiness, and you bring the doctrine of Providence to bear on it and they impatiently dismiss it and say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know that, but that's not what I need right now." And I don't know what they think they need beyond the fact a good God is graciously in control of every detail of life, but they quickly – and this has happened so often – they will quickly dismiss any discussion of divine Providence because they want to luxuriate in a perverse sort of way, the human difficulty that they are in. Well listen, beloved, when you understand the doctrine of divine Providence, you realize that it is the answer to every problem in your life. It is the answer to everything that troubles your soul. So rather than something that is brushed quickly aside and say, "Yeah, I know all of that but now help me deal with this great sense of problem that I have," no, no, if you can quickly brush off the doctrine of divine Providence and say, "Yeah, but I still got all of these problems," the truth of the matter is you must not understand divine Providence or you wouldn't so easily dismiss it. And I say that using the generic general "you," not addressing it to anyone in the room as I say this. But that's how important this is.

I would venture to say, not to compare biblical doctrines with one another. I'm about to say something foolish, but I would venture to say that nothing in my Christian life has changed me as much as an understanding of the doctrine of divine Providence, and I know that it will have the same impact on you if you hear what we have to say tonight and embrace it and rest in it. This is what we want to talk about this evening. And what this is, is just a continuation of the periodic series that we have been doing on systematic theology. Over a period of time on Tuesday nights, sometimes on weekends, we have

been teaching through systematic theology, through the authority of the Bible, the character of God, and most recently in our past few messages on systematic theology, we studied the doctrine of the divine decrees, the idea that God planned before the beginning of time everything that would ever happen. We paused to look at what that meant for the spiritual destination of the souls of men and the doctrines of election and the doctrine of reprobation, and we saw how the divine decrees included that God elected some to salvation and others he passed over not to receive salvation, and this was all planned in the mind of God before time began, the doctrine of the divine decrees with the subset of election and reprobation. Then most recently when we were in systematic theology, we had a message on the doctrine of creation, and you think about it this way: there is a wonderful symmetry when you study systematic theology that is just very exciting and invigorating, to be honest with you. The divine decrees say that God had a plan. Creation says that in time God started the plan and he put things in place, and over the six days in Genesis 1, he created everything. The doctrine of divine Providence says that now having created everything, God has and always has been and always will be directing his creation, which he planned before the beginning of time, to most certainly accomplish his will in every detail that he planned before the beginning of time. So you can think about it this way: God planned the universe, God created the universe, and now he is sustaining and directing the universe to accomplish the plan that he had before the beginning of time. When you start to see how these things fit together, you are greatly humbled by the majesty and the wonder of the mind of God and the power of God to plan and execute such a magnificent, multifaceted, infinitely complex thing such as the universe and its operation.

Let me give you a technical definition of Providence as we begin. Those of you that are taking notes will need to write quickly, if you will. But the doctrine of divine Providence means this: it means that God continually upholds his entire creation and he sovereignly works in absolutely everything that happens and thus directs all creatures and events to accomplish his will. I'll say it again: God continually upholds his entire creation and sovereignly works in absolutely everything that happens and thus directs all creatures and events to accomplish his purposes.

Now, it was about five years ago that I treated this topic in a series of three messages when we were meeting over at the place in northern Kentucky. Many of you were not with us at that time and so it is good to come back to it. But what we find as we go through this series on systematic theology, that as we go through it in a systematic way, sometimes we're going to circle back and treat subjects that we handled in isolation in the past, now we are doing them as part of a greater whole and that's what we're doing here as we come to the doctrine of divine Providence.

One of the things that this doctrine of divine Providence means is this, and I'm going to speak in a most general way here with what I'm about to say, but I fear that it's a common way of thinking in Christian living, that people have this idea, this abstract idea that God is sovereign. Okay, good enough, God is sovereign. But what they mean by that is that life will go on and God will just intervene when something goes wrong and fix it and then withdraw his hand, and they have the idea that their decisions are the final cause of

what happens in life and when something goes on, then God steps in at that moment and directs it. Well, you see, that's a very defective way to think about God and his sovereignty. God is working through absolutely everything that happens. It's not that he steps in and then steps back; when you have made a mistake or when you are having a really bad problem he can step in and fix it and then step back away from it. That's a totally wrong view of things. No, God is at work in absolutely everything that happens, so much so that Joseph could say in Genesis after his brothers had sold him into slavery and everything that happened in Joseph's life that ultimately led to him becoming the Prime Minister of Egypt, Joseph could look at that wicked act of his brothers and say, "You meant that for evil against me, your intention was evil, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result," Genesis 50:20. So Joseph could look at it and say even when his brothers were sinning against him, God had a good purpose that he was working out in the midst of that that his brothers were unaware of at the time.

And beloved, that's the way that we can think about all of life. You think about your mistakes, your sinful things even that you've done that you still bear the consequences of maybe, or the way that people have sinned against you, or this unfair thing happened. Here's what you must understand: is that through it all, God has had his hand working and directing everything that has ever happened in the universe and that includes everything that ever happened in your life, in order to bring about a result that he determined before the beginning of time that he wanted to have happen. And when you think that way, it changes all of life. All of a sudden you're not afraid. All of a sudden you're not regretful. All of a sudden you can say, "Somehow this is all in the hand of God and I can trust how this works out."

I remember not all that long ago speaking with a woman whose husband was in the hospital and she found strength in this idea that God's hand was at work and that there was a confidence and a strength that came from knowing that even in the uncertain future that was just ahead as her husband lay on a very sick bed, that she could rest no matter what the outcome was knowing that God was at work in it. Well, that's just an illustration of what this doctrine means.

So here's what we want to do tonight. I want to give you three points of consideration for the doctrine of God's Providence. Some of them have multiple sub points here. This is woven throughout Scripture. You cannot understand Scripture at all if you deny this doctrine, but what we want to do is we want to see Providence in the way Scripture presents it in its broad statements, the way that it presents it in detailed statements, and then to take a look at what it means for you personally, and that's how we will add to our series on systematic theology dealing with the doctrine of Providence in this way.

So first of all, our first point for tonight is this: God's Providence is broad. It is broad. And just to repeat the definition one more time to keep it fresh in our mind: God continually upholds his entire creation and sovereignly works in absolutely everything that happens, absolutely everything. Not one star in orbit, not one atom under a microscope is outside the sovereign control of God, and because of that, he directs all creatures and events to accomplish his will. Point 1: God's Providence is broad. It covers

everything in the universe and to turn now to Scripture, I invite you to turn to Ephesians 1. Ephesians 1, and if we go through this a little too quickly for you to keep up, you can always go back to the more detailed messages from 2012. They are available on our website.

So tonight, Ephesians 1:9 where the Apostle Paul says,

9 [God] made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him [that is, in Christ] 10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.

It's comprehensive. All things in Christ, things in heaven and things on the earth. And he goes on and says,

In Him 11 also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

Here we see it, God's will, the term we have used to describe it in our study of systematic theology, his divine decree was comprehensive of everything that would ever happen in creation, and what Paul is saying is that God takes all things and works it after the counsel of that will of his. Nothing is excluded. Paul could not say "all things" unless everything was included in it.

And he uses that word, that term, in verse 10. Look at it there with me. In the NASB it's translated "the summing up of all things." To sum up here in this context means to summarize, and it's used something like this in an analogy that you can relate to from TV shows or something like that. This is the word that would be used for an attorney giving his closing argument at the end of a case where he tells the jury, "Here's the evidence that you've seen that's been presented. Let me show you how each part fits into my theory of the case, and because each part fits into my theory of the case, you should render a verdict in favor of my client." The individual parts relate to a bigger whole and it is summed up and summarized in that way. Well, what Paul is saying here is that God takes all of the individual things that happen in the course of the universe and he is working to sum them up to accomplish the great purpose that he determined before the beginning of time; that ultimately all things would be found to be brought into subjection to the Lord Jesus Christ; that everyone that he chose for salvation would most certainly enter into Christ and be saved by him; and that all of the other purposes and the rise and the fall of nations, would all work together in such a way that exactly what God wanted to happen would be accomplished without fail, without exception. That's how great God is. His Providence is broad. So Paul says that God "works all things after the counsel of His own will." Beloved, do you realize what that means? For God to have the power to work all things after the counsel of his own will means that he is in absolute control of absolutely everything that happens.

There are some other passages that we should look at and consider. We'll just read this one for now, Psalm 103:19. Those of you taking notes, Psalm 103:19 says,

19 The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, And His sovereignty rules over all.

It is broad. It is comprehensive. It is exhaustive.

You're in the book of Ephesians, turn to the parallel passage in Colossians 1, if you would, Colossians 1:15. I'll give you just a moment to turn there. Colossians 1:15 says,

15 He [referring to Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Not indicating that he was created but that he has the preeminent rank in all of creation. He is first over all. And in verse 16 it goes on to say,

16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible

That's pretty comprehensive, isn't it? The heavens and the earth, everything invisible, everything visible. That is a comprehensive broad statement. He goes on to say speaking of spiritual beings which we will be studying in the rest of the month of August,

whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Christ is holding all things together in the universe visible and invisible, in the heavens and the earth. He holds all things together by his power. He is sustaining everything that happens by his omnipotent might. There is no one like the Lord Jesus.

In Hebrews 1:3, it says that,

3 [Christ] is the radiance of [God's] glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.

Beloved, listen to me: over and over and over and over again, Scripture speaks about the sovereign rule of God, his power upholding his creation in these absolute unqualified terms. Everything, all, all things, there are no exceptions. All making the point for this evening that God's Providence is exhaustively comprehensively broad. He reigns over all. He gives life to all. He holds all things together in Christ. He moves all things to achieve his purposes, so much so that even when wicked men are acting according to their own wicked desires without any regard to the purposes of God, God is still without participating in their sin, directing them to accomplish what he wanted. Scripture says in Acts 2, that they nailed Christ, godless men nailed Christ to the cross in furtherance of the

predetermined plan of God. So if the ultimate act of human criminality in crucifying Christ furthered the purpose of God, how much everything else that ever happened in the course of human history. What does this mean? It means that the stars stay in their orbit because God holds them there. Your arms stay on your body because God is upholding you. The seat on which you sit this evening is holding you up by the power of God. Every aspect of the universe is held together by the power of Christ.

So his Providence is broad and, beloved, what I want you to see is this, just in terms of what we are talking about here this evening, is that you – let's state it this way, let me state it more congenially – a man cannot deny God's active rule in the manner we are discussing without denying the Bible. You cannot read exceptions into this comprehensive language that pervades through Scripture. God rules over all. His Providence is broad. His control is complete. He is at work in absolutely everything that happens.

Now that's easy enough, in one sense, I guess. We see those broad statements but let's look at it this way: you might be able to affirm and to agree with those statements and yet struggle, as I did as I was describing at the opening of the message, and wrestle with things in the details of life and to say, "But this is really difficult and I really blew it back there, and you don't know how I sinned at that particular point in time, and I ruined my life with my sinful behavior," from a human perspective. And you wrestle with how could it be that God's Providence was at work even in that? How can it be that God's Providence is at work in this situation that looks so black and hopeless in my life? How can it be that God's Providence is at work in this perverse human relationship that I've been enduring for decades? How can that possibly be? And you wrestle with it in the details of your personal difficulties. Maybe it's not just past regrets, maybe you worry about the future. You worry about the future of the world. People are getting all up in arms about North Korea's nuclear capabilities and you worry about that, what's going to happen? Or you worry about what's going to happen in your own life. I don't know how this illness or this financial difficulty or this relational problem, I don't know how any of this is going to work out. Well, beloved, what we want to do in our time remaining here is to help you conquer that kind of ground.

You see, it's one thing to see and recognize the Bible's statements about the broader Providence of God but I believe that the power and the force of this in the human heart is greatly increased when you see how the Bible declares the Providence in God in all of its details. You see, it's not just that the Bible says God is in control of everything, you read from Genesis all the way through to Revelation and you see over and over and over again details which the Bible attributes to the hand of God that you would never even think of if you were not acquainted with the teaching of Scripture.

So what we want to do here in the next portion of our time, is to look at point 2 and that is this: that God's Providence is detailed. It is detailed. God's Providence is broad, it is asserted in comprehensive statements, he is over all. Now what I find so very helpful about this is that the Bible shows in detail just how broad God's Providence is. It's one thing to say that God controls everything, that he is at work in everything that happens,

it's another thing altogether, beloved, to go detail by detail by detail, and list item after item after item, which Scripture attributes to the hand of God. And what we want to do is look at four of these things here in our time this evening.

First of all, you see God's Providence over nature. God's Providence over nature. Scripture asserts in unambiguous terms that God absolutely rules over the natural order. And obviously, tonight I'm only giving you representative passages, not everything exhaustively, but with that in mind, turn over to the book of Psalms, Psalm 147, which occurs right in the middle of six Psalms that are culminating the entire Psalter with a fireworks of praise to God. "Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!" over and over and over again in Psalms 145 through 150, and here in the central Psalm of that, you find these declarations of ascribing praise to God because he rules over the natural order.

Look at Psalm 147, beginning in verse 4, let's say. We could read the whole Psalm and if I'm not careful that's exactly what I'll end up doing. Psalm 147:4, speaking of Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Israel, it says,

4 He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them. 5
Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite.

Jump down to verse 7,

7 Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; Sing praises to our God on the lyre, [here we go with his rule over the natural order], 8 Who covers the heavens with clouds, Who provides rain for the earth, Who makes grass to grow on the mountains. 9 He gives to the beast its food, And to the young ravens which cry. 10 He does not delight in the strength of the horse; He does not take pleasure in the legs of a man. 11 The LORD favors those who fear Him, Those who wait for His lovingkindness.

Look at it there, things that by human measure might seem so utterly incidental. The clouds of the sky, the raindrops of any given storm, the grass on the mountain, the food which a beast eats, all attributed to the ruling sovereignty of God.

Drop down to verse 15.

15 He sends forth His command to the earth; His word runs very swiftly. 16 He gives snow like wool; He scatters the frost like ashes. 17 He casts forth His ice as fragments; Who can stand before His cold? 18 He sends forth His word and melts them; He causes His wind to blow and the waters to flow.

Nature runs its course according to the plan and the power of God and that's why when Scripture speaks of looking up at the stars at night, it says that the heavens are declaring the glory of God. That's why when you see a spectacular sunset or you see a particularly

striking lightning storm and the bolts of lightning shattering the night sky, so often your mind is brought to acknowledge the power and the revelation and the creative work of God in what you see. You see the handiwork of God in that. That's because your mind is conditioned to think as Scripture does that attributes these things to the work and the power of God, not happening in isolation from him.

Well, you see his hand over the detail over nature, you can also see Scripture declaring that his hand is over the animal kingdom. Over the animal kingdom. God rules over the brute beasts. If you'll turn over to Psalm 104 with me, we'll take a quick look at a single passage there. Psalm 104:24, all of this building toward a great practical pastoral application at the end of our time together this evening. Psalm 104:24, as the psalmist praises God for his care over creation and he says in verse 24,

24 O LORD, how many are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all; The earth is full of Your possessions. 25 There is the sea, great and broad, In which are swarms without number, Animals both small and great. 26 There the ships move along, And Leviathan, which You have formed to sport in it. 27 They all wait for You To give them their food in due season. 28 You give to them, they gather it up; You open Your hand, they are satisfied with good.

God provides for the created order. He provides for the brute animals in his creation. He says in verse 29,

29 You hide Your face, they are dismayed; You take away their spirit, they expire

What Scripture is saying here, except for this: that animals live, eat and die through the Providence of God. In Matthew 6, Jesus says that God feeds the birds of the air, that he clothes the flower of the field. In Matthew 10, he says not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from your heavenly Father. The detail of this is astonishing.

Now, it's quite common for people to want to mock that and to say, "Does God really care what route I take home on my drive back from work?" Or to mock the consideration that God would be so involved in every detail of his universe. That's driven in part by a mockery, a mocking spirit that God will judge in time, it's also a spirit that wants to bring God down to our level and bring God and put him in the container of our own limitations. But I think it's helpful to think about it from this perspective: most of you have an aspect of your life that you pay close attention to. Maybe as a housewife, a house keeper, you like to keep your house in a particular detail of order. Some of you men, maybe some of you ladies, watch your finances down to the penny and you are very close with how you work it. Those of you that have more advanced jobs understand that the execution of your duties require you to pay close attention to detail, sometimes with mathematical precision. An artist is concerned with every detail of their painting that they are making, understanding that the detail in the top right corner accents and is related and is connected to what happens over in the left center of the piece. We understand that in

isolated incidents of things that we care about. Well, beloved, look, what we can understand in a small way in certain aspects of our life, multiply that by infinity. God is the God over his creation. God planned it all from the beginning. God cares about how every detail relates to every other detail to the infinite degree. And if you can have an aspect of your life that you pay close attention to, by what right, by what fault of human reason, could anyone say that God wouldn't care about every detail in his creation? God is just so much greater than us and his mind and his care are so expansively beyond ours that everything that is under his care, under his creation, everything that he planned, is a proper object of his omniscience and his omnipotent power. So yes, we assert God's Providence, God's sovereign care and his attention to every single detail in the universe, every single atom and every single molecule that exists anywhere under the heavens because that's just how great God is. And the fact that you and I might not care about big parts of this doesn't mean that we should project our indifference upon the mind of a holy God who created and planned it all.

So yes, God rules over the natural order, he rules over the animal kingdom in detail. Thirdly as we look at the detail of God's Providence, we see that God reigns over seemingly chance events. Seemingly chance events. We won't spend much time here but in Proverbs 16:33, there is a very interesting verse that says,

33 The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD.

The seeming random way that they used to ascertain the will of God in the Old Testament, which would be somewhat akin, a little bit of a parallel to us tossing dice, a little loose parallel there, we might flip a coin. We say this is random, you know, whatever comes up we attribute to chance. Scripture doesn't buy into that at all, Scripture tells us that God directs what comes up. God has a hand even in that. And what it means, beloved, is this, kind of reinforcing what I was saying just a moment ago is this: is that things that we think are trivial, God controls in detail. The Puritan commentator, Matthew Henry, said this. Listen to this closely. "The divine Providence orders and directs those things which to us are perfectly casual and fortuitous. Nothing comes to pass by chance nor is an event determined by a blind fortune, but everything occurs by the will and counsel of God. What man has neither eye nor hand in, God is intimately concerned in."

Now think about it. We can understand this. I remember many many years ago in my hometown of North Vernon about two hours from here, there was the most random fatal accident that you could possibly imagine. I didn't know the person that was involved but they were just driving along on US 50 somewhere near the Muscatatuck River. Ah, my homeland. It warms my heart thinking about these things. Some of you have driven over there. And as they are driving along, a tree falls at just exactly that moment on the car and crushes the person to death. Totally random, so it would seem, and yet at that exact appointed time, this was what God had appointed to happen at just exactly that time.

And when we understand the doctrine of divine Providence, thankfully that happened many years ago so there is no chance of remembering who it was or their family being overwhelmed if they stumbled across this message, but we would look at that and say,

"Oh, just five seconds one way or the other and the person would have been safe." That's the wrong way to think. We should look at that and say, "This is an awe-inspiring manifestation of the Providence of God." And it's just as much the Providence of God in control of details when the tree falls on the car at just that moment and a fatality results, as it would be if it had been two seconds later and the car just barely passed by. God is in control of all of that. He's in control of all of those details. He's in control when you hit the brakes just in time and just miss the accident, he is in control and working out his purposes when you don't see the car and there is a collision. He is in control of it all, even when it seems to be just a matter of random chance. Out on the thought.

But as you consider Scripture, you can go from this micro view, you go from nature to the animal kingdom down to seemingly chance events, you can expand out again to the macro view and realize that God rules over the nations. God rules over the nations. We've given you four details of the way that God's Providence is detailed. We've looked at the animal kingdom, we've looked at nature, we've looked at chance events, and now we see that God rules over the nations. And beloved, this is such a comfort in the continual turmoil of world politics and everything that happens that dominates headlines and causes us to be concerned about our future. World rulers have power because God gives it to them. Scripture is absolutely clear about this. In Daniel 2:20, it says this,

20 Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, For wisdom and power belong to Him.

It is he who changes the times and the epochs. He removes kings and he establishes kings.

God is in control and as you read the broad sweep of the Old Testament, you see over and over again the rise and fall of nations being attributed to the hand of God. He strengthened the hand of Cyrus of Persia, and you just go over the course of human history. Egypt comes and Egypt falls. Israel comes and Israel is cast down. Assyria is up, Assyria goes down. Babylon is up, Babylon goes down. Persia goes up, Persia goes down. The heaving of the ocean. Greece is up, Greece is down. Rome is up, Rome is down. And through it all you see the hand of God being the factor that Scripture attributes these rises and falls of nations to, so much so that beforehand he could speak with specificity, Jeremiah could say that Babylon would reign for 70 years. How could he speak with such chronological accuracy except that God is in perfect control of it all? Nations rise and fall at his command.

And beloved, I don't really see much of this in the life of our church but it needs to be said. It's always a good reminder for us, is that you and I should trust the Providence of God in the outworking of world affairs even if we don't like the men or women that hold power, even if we don't like what's happening politically, we don't like the decisions that our leaders make. Beloved, we need to come back and realize that God has appointed them, God has given them that power, and while we don't trust the wisdom of men, we trust the Providence of God who is working out his plan with perfection. Not only that, we are citizens of heaven. We are not living for this world anyway. The things that

happen here on earth are of incidental consequence to us. Even if they greatly impact our life, they have nothing to do with this course of eternity that God has appointed for us in Christ.

So all of a sudden you start to see, it should start to dawn on you if it hasn't already, "This means that I can live above the shifting politics of the world, doesn't it?" Yes, that's exactly what it means. "This means that I don't have to worry so much about what happens on my next step. I'm freed from worry here, am I not?" You say, "Yes, that's true, I am because God's hand is in it." And even if something earthly, adverse happens to me, that's okay because God's hand is in that. God appoints trials for us to go through to glorify him, to sanctify us. It's all in his hand. This is wonderfully liberating. We haven't even gotten to that part of the message yet. I just can't help myself.

So beloved, let's step back and think about it this way: you can think about God's Providence, if this is helpful, on a linear continuum, on a broad line. On one end of the line you have the small details of existence of the operation of the earth, of the operation of your life, that it seems like no one would care about and it doesn't matter at all, God's Providence is working through even those. He is doing that. He is working it out. On the other end of the spectrum, you have the complex affairs of nations that are way beyond our ability to have any control or input on. There are earthly forces that are far beyond our ability. And you could look up at the heavens and see the orbits of the stars and the coming of a solar eclipse in just a few days, you look at all of that and say, "This is all so far beyond beyond me." And you come back to Scripture, you come back to the doctrine of divine Providence and you realize and you rest. "This God that I know through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ rules over the small things, he rules over the big things, and he rules over everything in between."

This doctrine, just say this incidentally, does not make man a puppet. Man still acts according to his own will and has a measure of freedom in his actions, but the Providence of God is so great and superintending that even when man is not aware that he is working according to a purpose of God, God is still able to work and does work through that. No man acts in an independent way, acts in absolute independence of the Providence of God. That's impossible because God has planned it all and God is at work in everything that happens. We could say it this way: God is simultaneously working in every act of every creature in all of his creation to make sure that his will is perfectly accomplished. God is the primary cause, man is the secondary cause in the outworking of human affairs.

So God's Providence is broad, all things. God's Providence is detailed: nature, animal kingdom, chance events, nations, those just being illustrations of the point. Here's the third point that brings it all home to us in a personal and a pastoral way and it's this, and this is so very sweet: God's Providence is personal. It is personal. Beloved, what's true of animals, what's true of nations, is true of you too. It's true about you also.

Look over at Psalm 139 and I'll remind you of a familiar passage. Psalm 139 in verse 13. David speaks of the formation of his body in his mother's womb and at the very moment

of conception and in the gestation of the subsequent nine months, David attributes it to the hand of God. In verse 13 he says this,

13 For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb.
14 I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well. 15 My frame
was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully
wrought in the depths of the earth; 16 Your eyes have seen my unformed
substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained
for me, When as yet there was not one of them.

God has given you life. God formed you in your mother's womb. God appointed the days in which you would be born and the days which you would live and the day that you would die. This is all known to God in advance, planned out in advance by him. God is involved. We can put it another way, speaking about these continuums and all of that. Let's do another familiar one: God is involved in your life from the womb to the cradle, to the grave and beyond. That's how great and surpassing his Providence is, how personal it is over you. Do you remember Matthew 10:30? No. Okay, that's all right, I'll read it to you then. Matthew 10:30 says,

30 But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

It cannot be more detailed than that.

So beloved, nothing in your life has ever escaped the active involvement of the hand of God, nothing ever will, and what this means is this, let's pull it all together here: the course of human history and the course of your personal life is not determined – we are blasting cannonballs at human philosophies here – the course of human history and the course of your personal life are not determined by random chance or by a blind impersonal fate. You should never speak in terms of saying, "Well, I was lucky here, or as chance had it, I did this, or fate appointed this for me," as if there was an impersonal force that was directing the course of your life. Don't talk that way. Don't think that way in your heart. It is time for us to put aside and put out worldly ways of thinking and let our heart be informed by what Scripture says, that our lives have been determined by God and he is working to accomplish everything that he designed for us to do. A personal God directs things in your life according to his wise and purposeful plan.

So let me ask you a couple of questions here. This changes the way that you think about everything. This changes everything. It really does. Let me ask you a question: do you enjoy a relatively comfortable life, a good life? Well, Providence would teach you to thank God for his kindness to you and not boast in your own efforts. None of us should speak of ourselves as being a self-made man. Scripture says what do you have that you haven't received? So if you enjoy a good and comfortable life, Providence should teach you to say, "God, thank you. I have so much more than I deserve." On the other end of the continuum by contrast, we could ask the question this way: has life brought you hardship and pain? Do you have people in your family that are just an utter pain in the

neck, among other things? Is life hard and sad? Beloved, of all people, I would encourage you to run to the doctrine of divine Providence.

What does this mean? Divine Providence means that, yes, God brought that pain and difficulty into your life. Your present difficulties are things that God has appointed for you to go through at this time in your life. Divine Providence means that right now you have exactly the life that God planned for you to have at this particular point. Maybe you are here in a secondary way as the consequence of your own foolish decisions, sinful choices, and utter foolishness that led you to it. What divine Providence means is you can forget about all of the secondary causes and look at life and say, "This is what God has for me now." And you say to yourself, "Yes, God has brought this pain and difficulty into my life. At one level, that is really hard to get your arms around, because I don't like this. How can I like and love the God that put this into my life that I don't like?" Well, settle down, take yourself in hand and preach to yourself with the comfort of Scripture. God's Providence means that his intentions for you in this are always good. God intends good for you. It has to be that way for those of you that are in Christ, it has to be good because God is a good God in comprehensive control of everything. He planned it from the beginning. He saved you in Christ. He is leading you into heaven. How could it be anything other than good, even if it is hard for a short period of time?

And what this means is that you give God – oh, Scripture would command us at this point, would command you, would direct you with authority, Christ would assert through his word his authority over your life right now and say, "Listen, you give God time to prove the goodness of his Providence even if it's hard right now." Providence teaches you to hold your tongue and not speak against your circumstances and to say, "No, I will submit to this. No, I will wait. No, I will be patient under the hand of God. He has appointed this for me," and as Sarah Edwards said after Jonathan was taken from her at the age of 54, she said, "Let us kiss the rod." Kiss the rod. God has brought the rod into your life to achieve better purposes in the end. And in that you remember Romans 8:28, that God causes – here it is again, utterly comprehensive – "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose."

The theologian, Herman Bavinck, said this and with this we will close, "The Christian surveys the whole of existence in the entire world and discovers in all things not chance or fate but the leading of God's Fatherly hand." Do you see with the eyes of faith the hand of God in your life? You should. You can. It's true.

Let's bow together in prayer.

Our Father, we bow before you. This is your world. This is my Father's world and in that, Father, we find great comfort knowing that your hand is in every detail that ever happens and that ever will happen.

Father, for some that are here with us perhaps watching over the live stream, having the weight of a heavy heart because of the difficulty of life, the difficulties are real, Lord, no

doubt about it but, Father, help them to see how the doctrine of divine Providence, how the assurance that your hand is in everything that happens lightens the load; that this is not a random force that has come upon them; that this is not a meaningless purposeless existence that they are walking through but rather, Father, is something that you have appointed for a time to achieve greater purposes in the end. Father, help us all to find our comfort in your sovereign care for us.

And Father, we remember we should have been quicker to state this, that the same God who rules over all in such broad and personal detail, it was that same God in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who went to the cross of Calvary to shed his blood for sinners like us; that Providence is in the hands of the one who put his hands up and received the nails in order to pay the price of our sin, the debt of our sin, that we might be justified, that we might be sanctified, that we might be glorified, all in accordance with a plan that you established before the beginning of time. O God, how great you are. How great are your thoughts. If we tried to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand on the sea.

So Father, we bow in worship. We submit in trust. And even in those deep personal difficulties that are such a constant strain and concern and even heartache for us, O God, we thank you that your hand is in it because that means that there is an ultimate purpose, a greater purpose than our present suffering, and it means that the outcome of all of these things somehow will be good. Lord, in your great power, you brought good out of the crucifixion of your own Son, infinite good, salvation to the nations through that wicked act at the hands of sinful men. Father, if you have done the greater, surely you will do the lesser thing and bring good through the things that you bring into our lives as well. So help us to rest in your goodness, rest in your sovereign care, and find in the doctrine of divine Providence the sweet rest that gives comfort to our souls. We pray these things in the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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