

IV. Divine Providence

Today we turn to a new topic under the doctrine of creation, which is the doctrine of divine providence. Divine providence concerns God's governance or supervision of the world – all that happens. The biblical worldview has a very strong conception of divine sovereignty over the world and human affairs, but at the same time it also presupposes human freedom and responsibility.

A. Biblical Data

Let's look then first at some biblical data concerning divine providence.

1. Divine Sovereignty

With regard to divine sovereignty, the biblical passages affirming God's sovereignty are too numerous to read during this time, but the New Testament scholar Donald Carson has summarized them under four main headings in his book, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*. I'll share with you Carson's four summary points.¹

1. *God is the Creator, the Ruler, and the Possessor of all things.*
2. *God is the ultimate personal cause of all that happens.*
3. *God elects his people.*
4. *God is the unacknowledged source of good fortune or success.*

So those four points summarize the passages in Scripture teaching a very strong view of divine sovereignty. Nobody who takes these

¹ D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, New Foundations Theological Library (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), pp. 24-35

passages seriously, I think, can entertain the currently fashionable revisionist views of divine sovereignty which deny that God really is in control of everything that happens in the world and that his providence does not extend to every detail of what happens.

2. Human Freedom

On the other hand, at the same time, the conviction that human beings are free and responsible moral agents also permeates the Hebrew way of thinking. Carson summarizes these passages under nine headings and they are as follows.

1. *People face a multitude of divine exhortations and commands.*
2. *People are said to obey, believe, and choose God.*
3. *People sin and rebel against God.*
4. *People's sins are then judged by God.*
5. *People are tested by God.*
6. *People receive divine rewards.*
7. *The elect are responsible to respond to God's gracious initiative.*
8. *Prayers are not mere showpieces scripted by God.*
9. *God literally pleads with sinners to repent and be saved.*

To this list of nine points or streams of tradition in the Scripture I would add a tenth one, and that would be all of those passages that speak of God's repenting in reaction to a change in human behavior. There are a number of passages in the Scripture where God threatens to bring judgment on people, but then they change and so God repents of the threatened judgment that he was going to bring upon them. That, I think, also shows that, in addition to God's sovereign control of affairs, people have the ability to

respond or not respond to God and so bring about a change on God's part.

These passages – these ten different streams of biblical teaching – I think rule out any sort of deterministic understanding of divine providence which would preclude significant human freedom.

The question is, of course, how do you put these together? How do you construct a model of divine providence that can equally affirm the scriptural teaching on divine sovereignty but as well human freedom and responsibility?

B. Systematic Summary

Theologians in dealing with the subject of divine providence have typically distinguished between God's *providentia ordinaria* (or God's ordinary providence) and *providentia extraordinaria* (God's extraordinary providence). God's extraordinary providence is his performance of miracles, where God acts in the world apart from using secondary natural causes as instruments. We will talk about God's extraordinary providence when we get to the subject of miracles. Here we want to talk about God's ordinary providence, which is non-miraculous in nature, and ask: How is it that God governs or superintends the world, especially the world of free creatures (like human beings), in such a way that his ends are achieved through the free decisions of human beings? The principal challenge that faces any account of God's ordinary providential governance of the world is going to be how you reconcile divine sovereignty with creaturely freedom, particularly human freedom. Here I want to highlight three competing views in this respect.

1. Calvinism

The first would be Calvinism, also called Reformed theology, from John Calvin, the great Swiss-French Reformer. Calvinism affirms divine determinism – that God unilaterally determines in a causal way everything that happens. This is a kind of divine unilateral causal determinism of everything that happens. That would obviously give the Calvinist a very, very strong doctrine of divine sovereignty because God causally determines everything that happens.

Now, you might say, “But doesn't that completely obliterate human freedom? How can the Calvinist affirm human freedom?” Well, the Calvinist affirms a view of freedom according to which freedom is compatible with causal determinism. So this view of freedom is usually called compatibilism. Compatibilists maintain that being causally determined to do something is not incompatible with doing it freely. By contrast, those who hold to incompatibilist views of human freedom (sometimes called libertarian views of freedom) would say that if you're causally determined to do something, then you don't really do it freely. It is incompatible to do something freely and to be causally determined to do it. So the Calvinist adopts a compatibilist view of human freedom according to which you can do something freely even though you're causally determined by God to do it.

Now, how can he make this claim plausible? I think it is by reinterpreting freedom to mean basically doing something voluntarily. He affirms a view of freedom as equivalent to voluntarism; that is to say, God doesn't make you do something against your will. It's not as though he drags you kicking and screaming to do something. You do it willingly even though you're

causally determined by God to do it. In that sense it's free. It's voluntary. It's not up to you. You don't have the ability to do anything different. This is not libertarian freedom. In these circumstances God has determined you to do it. It's up to God what you do. You cannot do anything else. You cannot act otherwise, but you do it voluntarily.

To give an illustration of this, imagine a terrorist who wants to mow down a crowd of people by driving a van into the crowd, thereby killing the people, and so he presses his foot on the accelerator and plows into the crowd, killing or maiming many people. Suppose that, in fact, the accelerator was stuck, so that he didn't need to press his foot on it at all. It would still have gone into the crowd and killed the people. The causal factors determining the automobile made the automobile mow down the people and kill them, and the fact that he was putting his foot on the pedal really made no difference whatsoever. The Calvinist would say this would be an illustration of his doing this voluntarily, even though the action was determined. It was causally determined by the malfunction of the automobile that these people would be mowed down and killed, but the terrorist nevertheless did it voluntarily. He didn't do it against his will. So on the Calvinist view you have a unilateral divine causal determinism of everything that happens, but nevertheless people don't do it against their will. They do it voluntarily.

2. Arminianism

In contrast to Calvinism is the view called Arminianism from the 17th century Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius. Arminianism affirms libertarian freedom – that people are not causally

determined by God to do everything that they do and that they do have the ability to do otherwise in certain situations. This view seems to affirm in a very robust way human freedom and responsibility. You freely choose to do these things, not simply voluntarily, but in a non-determined way. It's up to you, and so God can hold you responsible. That seems to affirm that second stream of tradition in Scripture for human freedom and responsibility.

How does the Arminian then explain divine sovereignty? The typical Arminian appeals to God's simple foreknowledge of the future in order to explain God's foreordination of everything that happens. That is to say, on the basis of his knowledge of what people will do, God then foreordains that it will happen, and his foreknowing it in no way determines it. He just knows that that's what people will do. He knows what their free choices will be, and therefore he declares and ordains that that is what is going to happen. That no more determines their choices than, say, an infallible barometer would determine the weather. If you had an infallible barometer, it would tell you with absolute certainty what the weather is going to be, but obviously the barometer wouldn't determine the weather. If there's any determinism here, it would be the other way around. The weather would determine the readings of the barometer. In a similar way, God's foreknowledge will give you absolute certainty about what is going to happen, but it's not as though the foreknowledge determines what will happen. God foreknows as he does because this is how people will choose, and then he ordains that it will happen in virtue of his foreknowledge. So he's sovereign because he foreknows what's going to happen in the future. Although this is typically what modern Arminians

believe, in fact, Jacob Arminius himself seem to hold to the third view that we shall discuss.

3. Molinism

Opposed to both of these views is a third view which is called Molinism, which is named after the Jesuit counter-Reformer Luis Molina. Molina also affirms, like the Arminian, that people have libertarian freedom – that God does not causally determine everything that is going to happen. It's up to you to choose in freedom-permitting circumstances whatever you would like to do.

But Molina has a different solution to the question of how God is sovereign. He says it's not enough that God looks into the future and sees what will happen. In a sense, that comes too late for God to be able to plan anything. If he looks in the future and sees what's going to happen, then foreordination becomes a sort of fifth wheel. It doesn't do anything. Rather, Molina's doctrine of providence is based upon his doctrine of middle knowledge. Middle knowledge is different than simple foreknowledge. Simple foreknowledge tells you what will happen. Middle knowledge is God's knowledge of what would happen under different circumstances. Molina maintains that logically prior to God's decree to create a world God knows how any possible person that he might create would freely choose in any circumstances he might place him in.

So, for example, logically prior to his creating the world God knows what you would have done if you had been the procurator of Judea in the first century instead of Pilate, when Jesus of Nazareth was presented before you – whether you would have condemned him to the cross or merely scourged him or perhaps declared him innocent and let him go.

On the basis of his middle knowledge of what free persons would freely do in these various circumstances God then decrees to create certain persons and to place them in certain sets of freedom-permitting circumstances. On that basis, then, he knows exactly how the future will go. So the world is governed by God in virtue of his middle knowledge of how everybody would act in any circumstances he put them in. Then, by putting them in those circumstances, he's able to arrive ultimately at his ends through the free decisions of creatures. It's extremely important in understanding the Molinist doctrine of providence to keep in mind that these circumstances are freedom-permitting circumstances. It's not that you're determined to do what you would do in those circumstances; it's just that God knows how you would freely choose.

Here's an analogy. When the FBI wants to catch a child pornographer or a drug dealer, they will often arrange a sting operation where they will have someone pretend to want to buy the child pornography or want to purchase the drugs. The minute the money exchanges hands the FBI nabs him and he's captured. Now, the criminal will inevitably claim that this sting operation was a setup – that it determined him to do the act and that he couldn't resist in those circumstances selling the drugs or the pornography, and that therefore he cannot be held responsible and convicted. But if the FBI has done its job well, as it knows how to do, it will not put the criminal in circumstances in which he is coerced to act as he does. It's just that they know him well enough that they know that he would freely sell the contraband if he were placed in those circumstances. Therefore the judge will rule that this was not

coercion but that in fact he freely sold the contraband and so can be held responsible.

So on Molinism the idea is that God has arranged which people exist in which freedom-permitting circumstances, so that through the free decisions of creatures God's ultimate ends will someday be achieved, and God then concurs with the free decisions of these creatures in producing their effects. That was the doctrine of simultaneous concurrence that we talked about last week.