

§ 8. Doctrine of Creation
Lecture 10
Different Views of 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.

Let's look then first at the biblical data concerning divine providence. With regard to divine sovereignty, the biblical passages affirming God's sovereignty are too numerous to read here 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

Number one would be that God is the Creator, the Ruler, and the Possessor of all things. So the first would be that stream of passages in the Bible teaching that God is the Creator, Ruler, and Possessor of all things. Number two is that God is the ultimate personal cause of all that happens. The second point then is the passages in the Scripture that affirm that God is the ultimate personal cause of everything that happens. Number three is that God elects his people. God has chosen a certain people for himself and has called them to himself. So number three is that God elects his people. Finally, number four is that God is the unacknowledged source of good fortune or success. Nothing really happens by luck alone, rather behind good fortune or success God is the unacknowledged source of those benefits. So those four points would summarize the passages in Scripture teaching a very strong view of divine sovereignty. Nobody who takes these passages seriously, I think, can entertain the currently fashionable revisionist views of divine sovereignty which denies 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.

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.² Number one is that people face a multitude of divine exhortations and commands. God issues commandments and exhorts people to do certain things which presupposes that they have the ability to follow those commands and exhortations. In fact, the second point – number two – is that people are said to obey, believe, and choose God. They can respond to his exhortations and

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

² Ibid., pp. 18-22.

commands. Three, however, people also sin and rebel against God. They do not necessarily do what he commands or exhorts them to do. People often sin and rebel against God. Number four follows from that – people’s sins are then judged by God. God holds people responsible for their sin and rebellion against him. Five, people are tested by God. God tests people in order to see the genuineness of their faith and the truth of their commitment to him. So people are tested by God which shows that he treats them as free and responsible moral agents. Number six is that people receive divine rewards. When people do respond in an appropriate way to God's commands and exhortations then God rewards them for their faithfulness. People receive divine rewards. Number seven – the elect are responsible to respond to God's gracious initiative. Remember we saw under divine sovereignty that God elects his people, but now at the same time this seventh point is that the elect are responsible to respond to God's gracious initiatives in electing them. Number eight – prayers are not mere showpieces scripted by God in a kind of dictatorial way. No one who reads the Psalms and the anguish of the prayers in the Psalms can think that these are mere dictations from God and not genuine expressions of human freedom. Finally, number nine, the last point – God literally pleads with sinners to repent and be saved. God wants people to be saved, but he doesn't force them to be saved. He pleads with them 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 do something to bring judgment on people but then they change and 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?

START DISCUSSION

Student: Would these ten things that you just outlined hold for all of the different – the three different – viewpoints that you outline: Molinism, Arminianism, and Calvinism?

Dr. Craig: Yes. Carson himself is a Calvinist, and yet he recognizes these nine streams of scriptural teaching that affirm human freedom and responsibility. So he's quite candid about that. I think we'll see when we get to our systemic summary that in some way all of these different schools want to affirm both of these points. But the question will be: who

has the best model for doing it? Which one can put them together in such a way as to not bruise the biblical data concerning one or the other point?

END DISCUSSION

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 do you reconcile divine sovereignty with creaturely freedom, particularly human freedom. Here I want to highlight three competing views in this respect.

The first would be Calvinism, or also called Reformed theology but is from John Calvin, the great Swiss-French Reformer. Calvinism affirms divine determinism – that God unilaterally determines everything that happens in a causal way. 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. 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. You cannot do anything else. You cannot act otherwise,

but nevertheless you do it freely. 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 kill the people. The causal factors of 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.

In contrast to Calvinism would be the view called Arminianism from the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius. Arminianism affirms libertarian freedom – that people do have the ability to do otherwise in free situations and that they are not causally determined by God to do everything that they do. There is genuine human libertarian freedom to do an act or to refrain from doing that act, and God does not causally determine you to do what you do. 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 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 they're free choices will be, and therefore he declares and ordains that that is what is going to happen. That in 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 doesn't determine the weather. It just infallibly tells you what the weather will be. 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.

Opposed to both of these views is a third view which is called Molinism, which is after the Jesuit counter-Reformer Luis Molina. Molina also affirmed, 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 these 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. He looks in the future, he sees what's going to happen, foreordination then 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. So, for example, God knew logically prior to his creating the world that if you had been the procurator of Judea in the first century instead of Pilate, God knows what you would have done 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 that the world is governed by God in virtue of his middle knowledge – of knowing 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 do.

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 that 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.

We're about out of time, so rather than open it for the discussion at this point let me say think about these three views. Ask yourself which one gives the best model for integrating divine sovereignty and human freedom. What we'll do next week is begin with any questions that you have, and then I will give my own personal assessment of these three views and – surprise, surprise – you will see which one of the views I favor.³