

GOD PROVIDES

Text: Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 10 **Read:** Psalm 104:24-32

1. God's providence

God is above creation, yet present in creation (Is 57:15)

God upholds creation (Ps 104:28ff)

God rules creation - all things come from his fatherly hand (Mt 10:29)

The good (Mt 6) and the bad (Am 3:6)

How can this be?

God's curse against sin (Ro 8:20)

First and second causes (Job)

Purpose (Ro 8:28)

2. How knowing this helps us

We can be patient when things go against us (Job)

We can be thankful when things go well (Dt 8:10; 1 Th 5:18)

We can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing will separate us from his love (Ro 8:38-39)

And so: *Be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and confident regarding the future.*

HC LD 10

Dear Congregation

Have you noticed how people take different approaches to helping others?

When some people agree to help you, they set you up for the task and walk away, and you're left wondering where to go from there. Other people just take over altogether, do the job for you, and leave you wondering how to do it next time. And then there's the other group of helpers, who get alongside you, give you the tools and guidance you need, and help you learn how to do the job for yourself.

And that's not a bad example for how different people understand God's involvement in creation.

Apparently *you can split every worldview – every understanding of reality – into three families.*

The **first family** of worldviews believe that a god created everything and then walked away and left it to sink or swim. As far as anyone can tell he no longer exists. That understanding of things is called Deism.

The **second family** of worldviews believe that a god has stayed intimately involved in creation, so much so that he's one and the same thing as creation. They believe the animals are part of god. The trees are part of god. We are part of god. That's called Panthesim.

And then the **third family** of worldviews believe that god is separate from creation but still remains involved in creation. This understanding of things is called Theism.

And of course the Bible teaches us that that is the way things are. God is separate from creation. But he's also still intimately involved in creation. He continues to provide for it, sustain it.

And that comes with implications for us - our attitude to things, how we face the joys and sorrows of life.

Point 1

But firstly, *where would you go in the Bible to see that God is this kind of God?* And one passage you can go to is Isaiah 57:15, "For this is what the high and lofty One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, ..." God is separate to creation, but also involved in it.

You'll remember that Isaiah actually had a personal experience of that. In chapter 6 you read of him being commissioned by God to his task as prophet. God gave him a vision of himself seated on his heavenly throne surrounded by angels, the temple shook and was filled with smoke. God asked, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And Isaiah answered, "Here am I. Send me!"

Isaiah was given a sense of God being above creation, but still involved in it. He was given a sense of his might, his power, his presence throughout the world. And the rest of the Bible reinforces that understanding of things.

And so you see time after time throughout the Bible that *God does continue to uphold and sustain his creation*. He isn't the clock maker who has wound up his clock and then gone away on a holiday, never to return. He's more like the engineer on a steam engine who oils the moving parts, checks the gauges, adds more coal to the fire, releases excess pressure. If it wasn't for him things would spiral out of control.

In fact God is even more than that. He's the one who commands the oil to maintain its lubricating properties and do its job. He commands the water in the boiler to expand and evaporate under the heat of the fire - build its pressure according to the universal laws he's put in place. He commands the coal to oxidise and give off its specific heat. By his command everything in creation stays in balance and acts and reacts according to the universal plan he has set in place.

In Psalm 104 we're given an Old Testament poetic picture of that. "How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. ... These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth."

Then, as well as upholding and sustaining his creation, ***God also continues to rule creation***. Nothing can happen apart from his will. In Matthew 10 Jesus says, 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.' Even those things that we might think of as completely insignificant in the big scheme of things are still subject to God's will.

Which means that ***everything good comes to us because God has sent it*** to us – rain, fruitful years, food and drink, health, prosperity. A couple of weeks ago we looked at Matthew 6 which talks about our everyday needs – like food, drink, clothes. Jesus says don't worry about these things, don't be overly concerned about them, don't spend your life chasing after these things. God knows you need them. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and he will give you these things as well.

On the other hand, if you believe this consistently, you have to also say that ***everything bad can only come to us by God's fatherly hand as well*** – drought, lean years, sickness, poverty. God says in Amos 3:6 for example, 'When disaster comes on a city, has not the LORD caused it?'

And some people would disagree with that. They would say that bad things come from Satan and God has no involvement in them at all. Some would even say that God is powerless when it comes to these things – he would stop them if he could, he just isn't able. Some even say that both good and bad ultimately depend on us and our prayers – God can only do the good things that he wants to if we pray hard enough. But of course, that's just increasingly putting us at centre stage instead of God - that's not the Bible's position at all.

Paul in Romans 8 helps us begin to understand what's happening when he writes that, 'the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it'. God was even the one who subjected creation to the terrible situation we find it in now.

And we're reminded of the consequences of Adam's fall in Genesis 3. ***God cursed a sinful world***, and all of creation, because of sin. Death, decay, sickness, demonic influence entered the world as a part of that curse. The book of Job clearly teaches us that even Satan can do nothing if God doesn't permit him. God isn't powerless to stop these things – in fact he will stop them when Jesus returns – but he has subjected the universe to these things as his punishment against sin.

On the other hand, God takes no pleasure in these things either. It's the devil who actively takes pleasure in reeking this kind of havoc. The devil, a sinful world, and our own fallen nature are responsible for these things, even if God is sovereign even over them. And the distinction we're starting to draw here is ***the distinction between first and second causes***. God in his sovereignty even harnesses 2nd causes that go against his revealed will to achieve his ultimate purposes.

Another distinction that's important to make involves ***the purpose behind these things***. The purpose Satan, a sinful world, and our fallen human nature serve is rebellion against God. But the purpose God fulfills through these things, even in a sinful world, is the ultimate good of those who love him – punishment for the wicked, and discipline for his children that leads to greater godliness and perseverance. Even in a sinful world God uses even the works of the devil, even our own sins, for the ultimate good of those who love him. This is another important distinction to keep in mind.

The big question that springs out of all of this is whether your view of God's providence is big enough to include all of this?

Point 2

Now, if we have a biblical worldview that includes this big view of God's providence to us and his creation, ***that has certain benefits for us***.

When a young child believes that everything in the world is good, and that mum and dad have everything under control, that brings with it a sense of security and confidence that you just don't have if you're growing up in a war zone with death hanging over your head and no idea where your next meal is coming from.

Of course, even in Australia, we quickly reach an age where we start to realise that not everything in the world is good, and that mum and dad don't have everything under control. And that's an unsettling point in life to reach. Suddenly it feels like the rock that you were standing on has turned to water.

But if you come to accept absolutely that God is the heavenly Father that has everything under complete control even if your earthly parents don't, and that he works everything for your good – you come to realise that even that watery foundation on which you now stand can hold your weight. The dynamics have changed, but you don't have to drown.

And that's the point we come to as we understand that God is the providing Father that he is. Things still don't feel as concrete as they did before, but we realise that there is no need for constant anxiety, there is no need for despair.

We come to realise that if God is even in control over the bad things in our lives, working to our ultimate good, *we can even be patient when things go against us*. In some way it is serving his ultimate purpose and our ultimate good.

Job was a man who found himself in that kind of situation – righteous, godly – but suddenly having his prosperity, children, and health ripped away from him, and his righteousness questioned. The rug was ripped out from under his feet. What was he going to do now? Continue to glorify God? Or curse him and die? And Job never did find out why God put him through that testing time, but he did come to accept that God had greater purposes that we might not know about, maybe can't even understand. He eventually repented from his presumptuous questions, and continued to glorify God.

Based on that kind of approach, Paul in Philippians 4 writes, “Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Which also reminds us to be thankful when things go well. Our parents constantly taught us to say thanks to people for the good things they gave us. If God is the one from whom all good things ultimately come, how much more shouldn't we thank him for them? In Deuteronomy 8 it says, 'When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you.' Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5 says, 'Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.'

And then as well as that *we can face the uncertain future in good confidence* because our faithful God and Father will let nothing separate us from his love. Paul writes in Romans 8, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

How many people don't start out in life hopelessly optimistic – life is good, the world is full of opportunity and lying at their feet.

Then by mid-life we've been battered and bruised into reality – we aren't going to be the high flier that we thought we were. We aren't going to avoid all the pitfalls that our parents generation fell into. We lower our expectations to something that we think we have a chance of reaching.

And unfortunately, by the end of life, many people have simply resigned themselves to whatever, or been reduced to despair. Things are nothing like they hoped. They have trouble finding work, let alone holding down their dream job. They poured so much time into their hopes and dreams that their family has moved on and they rarely see them. They're lonely.

How do we avoid disillusionment and despair when life treats us like that?

And it comes down to your priorities –what do you think is important? Many people at the end of their life will tell you that family and friends are the highest priority in their life, far ahead of money and possessions. But what is most people's priority at the beginning of their life? Career, income, possessions, setting

themselves up. Is it any wonder that when people have their priorities upside down at the beginning of their lives, that they don't have much worthwhile to show at the end?

Women, in the '60s who chose a career path and income over family and possibly even a husband now talk of how lonely they are and how they wished they had done things differently. I've heard from men who made the same kinds of choices at the same time who now live alone. Ex-wives and children don't want to know with them any more. Their savings are eaten up by their addictions.

Our priorities from the beginning of our lives need to be God, others, ourselves – love for God, love for others, ourselves. And if that really is the order of our priorities, and all we have left at the end of our lives because of life's difficult circumstances is God's love, a small circle of loving family and friends, and enough to get by from day to day – will we be disappointed?

And tonight, God promises that nothing can separate us from his love through faith in Jesus Christ.

And if we do love God first and others before ourselves, many in our circle of family, friends, and church contacts will love us to the day we die.

And again, in Matthew 6, God does promise that as a general rule he provides our needs for today.

If we have our priorities right, we can face an uncertain future in good confidence. Life won't be a bed of roses. But God will look after us. And we need not fall into disillusionment and despair.

Conc

So, how does a wholehearted belief in God's providence help us in reality? As the catechism says, we can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and confident in God for the future. Could there really be any better way to live?