

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

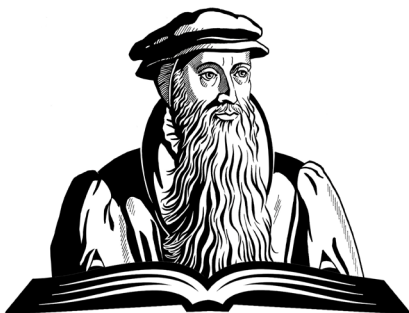
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2:

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Lecture 12

PROVIDENCE



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 2 ~ The Doctrine of God

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Module 2 ~ Lecture 12

PROVIDENCE

Learning to drive a car includes focusing on several details all at once. You have to be thinking about what's happening outside the car, looking at the lines on the road, the stop signs and traffic lights, other cars that may be passing you or coming into the road, then there are all the turns and hills, and so on. But simultaneously, you have to be focused on things inside the car. You have your mirrors that you have to look at; you have a gas pedal and a brake pedal; there are gears, and most of all, the steering wheel, which determines the direction that you're going to drive. In addition to all of that, you have to know your directions—where you are, and where you are going. And all of this has to be coordinated to drive safely and successfully. The driver must be in control of the vehicle at all times. Well, if you know how to drive, you know that sense of control and responsibility. But we are only talking about one person and one vehicle. What about the universe as a whole? God sovereignly controls all things, at all times, in all places, from the microscopic world of cells and molecules, to large-scale matters like planets and galaxies, and every detail in between. This is what we call divine providence.

The series of lectures, in this second module on systematic theology, has been devoted to the study of the doctrine of God. The purpose has been to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself. In the early lectures, we explored what the Bible teaches about God, in His being. In lectures 9 to 12, we have been turning our attention to all things outside of God, namely, the things of creation. You will recall that in lecture 9, we took up for consideration the doctrine of the decrees of God. We saw that the divine decree determines everything that happens outside of God, from initial creation through God's governing providence in history. In this lecture, we will consider the doctrine of providence—God's works of governing all His creatures and all their actions.

We will begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture, to open up our further consideration of the doctrine of providence. In Daniel 4:34–35, we read these words by King Nebuchadnezzar: “And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: and all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?” Well, these words come at the conclusion of the story. At the beginning of this account, we read of Nebuchadnezzar strutting about in his palace, boasting of how he has built his enormous kingdom, by his own power, for the display of his own glory. He had risen to great fame and wealth, as the leader of the world empire of the time, with vast territories and power. He was lifted up in his pride, and Scripture teaches us that “pride goeth before destruction and an haughty spirit before a fall,” as we see in Proverbs 16:18. So, as Daniel had prophesied be-

forehand, God cast down Nebuchadnezzar and humbled him. His mind was taken from him, and he was driven from his palace. For seven long years, he lived in the fields as a beast. His clothes were wet with the dew of heaven; his hair grew; his nails became like claws. I mean, this is a picture of absolute humiliation. After seven years, God restored Nebuchadnezzar's reason, and he returned to his position as king. The words that we were considering, in that text from Daniel, teach us, from Nebuchadnezzar's own mouth, what he had learned from His experience. What do we see? He is led to humble himself under God's hand. He turns from worshiping himself, to bow down and worship the Lord. He acknowledges that the Lord is high above all others, that He is the "most High" God. Unlike men who pass away, the Lord is eternal—He lives forever. God's kingdom excels the kingdoms of this world, in its expanse, and its duration. By comparison, even the greatest men and creatures of this world are "reputed as nothing," similar to what we read in Isaiah 40:17–18: "All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him?" Nebuchadnezzar also confesses the absolute sovereignty of God, and proclaims His comprehensive work of providence. He says, "He"—that is, God—"doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth." God controls all His creatures and all their actions. And His providential rule is certain, complete, comprehensive, irresistible. Nebuchadnezzar affirms, "And none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" Nebuchadnezzar proclaims the doctrine of providence, which he came to see the hard way, through his own humiliation. Well, we've been given the Scriptures, to know and understand this doctrine, and we would do well to receive and believe all that God has revealed to us about this doctrine.

In this lecture, we will explore an introduction to the doctrine of providence, providing some basic categories and terminology that will equip us for exploring these truths further in the days ahead. The doctrine of providence reveals that God is most holy, most wise, most powerful, in His sustaining and governing all His creatures and all their actions.

Secondly, let's consider the doctrinal exposition of providence. This doctrine is simply stated in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 5, paragraph 1: "God, the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence." In seeking to expound this doctrine, there are several points that we must firmly have fixed in our minds.

First of all, God executes His decrees both in the works of creation and providence. In the previous lecture, we considered creation; here in this lecture, providence. This work of providence reveals to us who God is. It manifests the fact that God is absolutely sovereign and that the exercise of that sovereignty is holy, wise, and good. God controls all things. Indeed, for anything to be outside the control and determination of God, would mean that He is not God.

Secondly, with regards to the nature of providence, therefore, we see that it is comprehensive and all-encompassing. God governs and sustains 100% of all creatures, and 100% of all their actions. Everything is "according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will," as we see in Ephesians 1:11.

Thirdly, God is immediately operative in every act of the creature. He has absolute control in predetermining the actions of men. Well, you might ask yourself, Then what role does the creature have in determining their actions? Well, the Bible affirms that they make real choices of their own volition, and that we are responsible and culpable for those decisions. To understand this, you will note in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 5, paragraphs 2 and 3, that we need to distinguish between the first cause and second causes. God is the first cause, determining all things according

to His eternal decree. He controls and works, however, through second causes, which are real causes, and not simply God's acts. This comes out in a familiar passage in Philippians 2:12–13, where we're told, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." So you see two things at work here. We're being told to "work out your own salvation," and we're being told that "God worketh in you both to will and to do of his own good pleasure." So God is determining both the means and the end. This is what we call the doctrine of concurrence. The doctrine of concurrence addresses the relationship of the simultaneous actions of God and men. You see this frequently in Scripture. I'll give you some examples. In Acts 2:23, "Him,"—that is, Christ—"being delivered by the determinant counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." So here are the Jews, who are culpable for their own wicked actions in crucifying the Lord, and yet simultaneously, His death was being brought to pass according to God's own counsel and predetermination. Or you think of Genesis 50:20, the account of Joseph speaking to his brothers after his father's death. Joseph says, "But as for you,"—speaking to his brothers—"you thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." So the brothers were making their own decisions, which were sinful and rebellious, and yet God was so ordering things in His providence, in order to bring about something beautiful and good. 2 Samuel 16:11 is another example: "And David said to Abishai, and to all his servants, Behold, my son, which came forth of my bowels, seeketh my life;"—it's a reference to Absalom—"how much more now may this Benjamite do it? let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him." This is David leaving Jerusalem, and there's the man that comes and is throwing stones at him and cursing him. Abishai wants to kill him, and David is saying, No, no, no, the Lord is in this. The Lord is, in His providence, sending him in order to carry out His work—"the Lord hath bidden him," as the passage says.

Well, we should also note that God is in no way tied to using means to His end. Miracles, for example, are extraordinary acts of providence, in which God works without the use of means, miraculously. And so we see, under this point, the fact that there is a relationship between God's sovereign decree being brought to pass in providence, in which He is controlling and governing all the affairs of men and bringing to pass His will perfectly and unchangeably, and that simultaneously, men are making choices, real choices, for which they're responsible. And these two things are brought together. And though it is mysterious and difficult for us to be able to get our minds around, nevertheless, it is not contradictory, and it is what the Bible teaches and what we are to receive by faith. We can know *that* these things are true without understanding *how* all of these things are true—*how* the relationship of God and His decree is connected to the decisions and choices that men make.

Well, then briefly, fourthly, what about the difficult things that happen to us? So is God controlling in His providence, the believers' trials? The answer is, yes. We learn about both God's purposes and His comforts in ordering and sovereignly disposing of the believer's sufferings.

So first of all, God's purposes in our sufferings. We see lots of reasons why the Lord causes His people to enter into seasons of trial. One of them is to try us. 1 Peter 1:3–7 speaks about this trial of our faith, in which the Lord is purifying His people, in which He is shaping them, and bringing them forth to glisten like gold.

We also see that the trials are to expose our sins. This comes out in Job 42:5–6. In the midst of trial, so often in the Christian's spiritual experiences, as they're examining themselves and seeking the Lord in His word and in prayer, the Lord brings to the surface, through these trials, sins

that have been previously unknown. And so it has a good salutary influence or impact upon us, in exposing sins that have to then be confessed, and that leads to repentance, and turning from those sins to the Lord. So that's a beautiful thing, a positive thing.

Trials also build the godly character of His people. James 1:2–4, where we see that we are to consider the trials that God's given to us, we're to look upon those trials with joy, knowing that they lead to patience and that they perfect the good work that God is doing, in making His people like unto the Lord Jesus Christ.

They are also to bring us to know God better. And so through the trials, we are brought to see things about God, and about who He is, and what He does, in ways that we could have never seen before. The Lord takes us into the dark places, in order to open up disclosures of His glory and beauty to His believing people. So they bring us to know God better, and bring us into sweeter communion and fellowship with Him.

Suffering is also used by God to produce fruit in our lives, and to prepare us for usefulness. The Lord comes, as John 15:1–8 tell us, and the Lord will prune His people, in order to produce greater fruit to the glory of the Father, and in order to equip His people for a greater usefulness. You will see this in 2 Corinthians 12:7–9, where Paul is brought, in his experience with the thorn in the flesh, to see that God's grace is actually abounding in his trial, and that God is making His power perfect in the weakness of His people.

Lastly, these trials also lead us to make God our all, and to prepare us for glory. You'll see this when you sing Psalm 73, the song of Asaph. They lead us to make God our all. All of the sudden the things of this world, the things associated with our health, our finances, our relationships, these other things which sometimes are so important to us—they, through trials, become less. The Lord becomes the one who is everything to us. And He's preparing us for heaven itself, longing to be weaned from this world, in order that we might be with Him in glory.

But also under this point, not only are there purposes in God's providential disposal of suffering, we also find the Christian's comfort in suffering. We have to affirm, for example, that God's love is behind all our trials—Romans 8:28–29, that this is the area in which the Christian is so often tempted to doubt, to unbelief, because in their pain, they feel as if it's an expression of the absence of God's love. Whereas, in fact, this is an expression of God's love, and the believer is being called to exercise faith and trusting in that. We also recognize that often there are no immediate answers—Job 1:21. There are no immediate answers because sometimes the Lord is doing things with us, in us, by us, through us—He's doing things that aren't actually just about us. So in the case of Job, God was getting glory for Himself in the heavens before Satan and the angels, and Job was left without understanding. He didn't know the purposes for which God was afflicting him. But that, too, leads us to a deeper exercise of faith and trust in the Lord. The solution is to cultivate nearness to God. Much of Psalm 119 is taken up with responding to affliction by communion with Jehovah. We also recognize that the outcome of our sufferings will always be big with mercy—James 5:11. The Lord will cause, in the end, His glory to abound over our difficulties.

We may be able to understand God's providence in suffering, and we may be able to say, Okay, we can see that God is orchestrating, God is the one who is sovereignly governing all of the very details of my circumstances, with regards to trials and suffering. But what about providence in the believer's sin? That seems to be a different matter. We can understand suffering and providence easier than we can understand sin and providence. I would encourage you to look at Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 5, paragraph 5. It's addressing these questions. But to be honest, it's one of my favorite sections of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Think for a second, just in a

brief survey, of what we can learn from the Bible about God's providence in the believer's sin. First of all, we're affirming God's role—God's sovereignty. He is wise, He is righteous, He is gracious in His dealings with us. So He permits, or He leaves us, at times, to ourselves, occasionally, for a season. The Lord will allow us to be left in our own circumstances, and left to be assaulted with temptation, and left to be exposed to the danger of sin, and the Lord will enable us to see many things as a result of this. So we see God's role with regards to the orchestration of the believer's struggles with sin. But that brings us then to think about the believer. The believer is still responsible. The believer is still responsible when left with manifold temptations, because the sin comes not from God's hand, but from our own corrupt hearts, even when it's in response to the world, and the temptations of the devil, and so on. We are the ones culpable and responsible for every sin that is found in our lives.

So what are the divine purposes for these seasons? Here's an example of some of those purposes. The first is loving discipline. Hebrews 12 tells us that "whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth." So sometimes the Lord will leave us to the corruption of our own hearts as a means of lovingly disciplining us, to chastise us for former sins. The Lord will also use it to discover unto us the hidden strength of our corruption. We may be feeling proud about our own sense of holiness or something, and the Lord will allow us to discover the hidden strength of corruption that is within us. Sometimes He'll use it in order to discover the deceitfulness of our own hearts, to show us the dangers that lurk from the enemy within, and therefore, make us more watchful. Sometimes He'll allow these seasons, in order that we might be humbled, because God gives more grace to those who are humbled. He uses it to raise up the believer to more close and constant dependence for their support upon God Himself, and as I said, to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, so that coming up out of the wreckage of sin, and confession, and repentance, there's a greater vigilance in watching against sin. And there are many other reasons why the Lord, in His infinite wisdom, permits these things.

An illustration of how God uses even our sin for good is found in the life of David. You all know the story of David murdering Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, and then taking Bathsheba and committing adultery against her. And this is grievous—this is a heinous sin, and a wicked scandal that brought great harm to David and Israel as a whole. But out of that, we have Psalm 51. So one of the fruits that comes from David's sin is a song of penitence that remains within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we ourselves are able to take up the very inspired words of the Holy Spirit, penned by David, and to use them as an expression of our own contrition, our own repentance for sin. You'll also recall, of course, that it is out of the union of David and Bathsheba, subsequently, that Solomon is born; and Solomon, of course, is in the line of the Messiah. So the Lord is pleased to bring the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is the greatest gift, and the brightest and most beautiful of all events in the history of the world—He brings that out of the wreckage, if you will, of David's sin, in taking Bathsheba to himself. So the Lord is able to rule and overrule in the sins of His people, bringing beauty out of ashes.

Lastly, all that we have considered relates to the believer. But what about God's providence and the reprobate? This is covered in Westminster Confession, chapter 5, paragraph 6. Very briefly, God is a righteous and just judge, so God's wrathful dealings with men are caused by their sins, and He is right in His providential punishment for those sins. At times, God does this through His judicial hardening of sinners. God will blind them; God will harden them; He'll withhold grace; He'll withdraw their gifts from them; He'll expose them to opportunities for sin; He gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, the power of Satan. And the Lord uses this as

a means of punishing those who are obstinate sinners against Him, though at times, the Lord uses the same things to soften others.

Well, thirdly, we have to consider this doctrine polemically. Very briefly, there are false views of providence. So on the one hand, first of all, there are those who believe that providence is merely foreknowledge, in the sense that God had a foresight of events before they happen. So people think of providence in terms of God looking down through the annals of history, and seeing how things would unfold, and therefore determining that that's how they would happen. But that contradicts everything we learned about the decrees of God, as well as what we're learning here about the exercise of the work of providence.

On the other hand, there are those who hold what is called deism—that God does not govern and sustain creation at all, that creation operates by itself. The picture that is often used is of someone winding up a clock, and then setting it on the shelf, and then it runs on its own, as if God created the world, and wound it up, and then it runs on its own. That is false—that is not what we learned from the words of Nebuchadnezzar, or any of the other material that we've covered in this section.

Then there is the idea of fatalism. Rather than divine providence through a personal God, orchestrating the events of time and space, fatalism is this idea of an impersonal blind determinism, that the world unfolds as a matter of fate or, in some of the Eastern religions, karma, and so on. And it's this impersonal kind of blind determinism. That contradicts what the Bible says as well. The Bible teaches us that God is the one who governs and sustains all His creatures and all their actions.

Well, lastly, we can now draw some practical applications for ourselves, in addition to what we've already covered previously. First of all, you see that this is a comforting doctrine, the doctrine of providence. The believer is always safe. The believer is always secure. The believer is always in the hand of God. In the words of Moses, "Underneath are the everlasting arms." And so it's always good for the church. Whatever the Lord is doing, whatever the Lord is orchestrating, that is being used by God to accomplish His infinitely wise, good and holy purposes, in a way that will bring blessing to His people. God is both all-wise and all-loving. So not only is it loving, but He is wise in the way in which He orchestrates it. So there is security for the Christian. There's divine purpose in all of our temporal pain, and in the confusion of the world around us. So it's a comforting doctrine.

It's also a humbling doctrine. We cannot take credit for anything good in our lives. Everything is from God. 1 Corinthians 4:7 says, "What hast thou that thou hast not received?" All that we know, all that we own, or that we are and have become, all that we have done for good—all of these things are from the hand of God. He receives the glory. We received them from Him. All that we can call our own is our sin. So it's a convicting doctrine. We're daily stripped of self and forced into self-conscious dependence upon the Lord. He alone is the one who keeps us. He alone is the keeper of Israel, who keeps both our body and our soul in our going out and our coming in, and so on. So it leads us to depend upon the Lord.

Well, by way of conclusion, we have been, in this lecture, considering a survey of the doctrine of providence. God executed His decree in the work of providence. This teaches us of God's most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions.

Well, this lecture brings this second module in systematic theology to a conclusion. Over the course of these lectures, we focused our attention on the doctrine of God, learning more about who God is, as He reveals Himself both in His word and His works. There's much more to study in this

area, but we hope that this will furnish you with the basic tools to a deeper knowledge of learning about the great God of glory.