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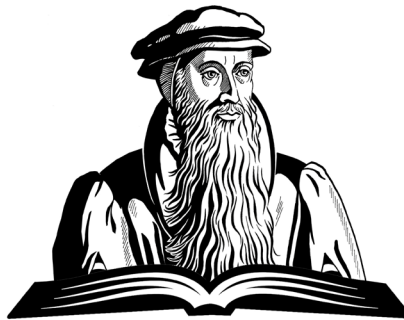
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

*by Rev. Jonathan Mattull*

Lecture #8

**God's Works of Providence**

*Catechism Question 11*



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

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# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

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*by Rev. Jonathan Mattull*

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# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

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# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

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# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

## VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

### Lecture #8

## God's Works of Providence

**Question 11:** *What are God's works of providence?*

**Answer:** *God's works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.*

The Bible clearly teaches that God made all things out of nothing. Do you remember the words from Latin that express this idea?—the words are, *ex nihilo*, “out of nothing”. God made everything, both seen and unseen, out of nothing. Remember that this is a great display of God’s power and wisdom. But the question comes, what did God do after he made all things? Some think that he set up the universe to function of its own power and ability. Well, we know that there are certain principles we discover in the universe that help explain how it works, such as the law of gravity, or patterns of weather. The Bible gives us more insight, and it reminds us that God continues to uphold all things. He directs all things. He’s actively at work in all that’s taking place today. God is sovereign over all.

Our Question today focuses our attention on this Biblical teaching. Look at Question 11 of the Shorter Catechism. It asks us, “What are God’s works of providence?” Well, the word “providence” comes from a word meaning “to see ahead,” or “to look after.” It has the idea of caring for something else. Here, it is asking about God’s general care of all things. We’re given this Answer: “God’s works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.”

Now, before going further, notice two words in the Answer—the words “preserving” and “governing.” These are essential to understanding what’s being said. To preserve something means “to keep it,” to guard it, to uphold it. Now sometimes, we might use the word “preserve” as when we preserve fruit or a vegetable. We’re keeping it for future use. Well, you can say, in some sense, that God is preserving everything. He’s the one that is actively causing it to continue existing. He’s the one who gives it the ability to remain. He’s engaged in the act of preserving all things.

The other word, “governing,” is from that idea of directing and guiding something. God is governing, that is, he’s directing actively everything that’s taking place at all times. Now, this is, again, a glorious truth that reminds us just how great God is, and how small we are in comparison, which should lead us to worship him who is the maker and sustainer of all things.

Well, to look at this teaching a bit more. Let us look at three main points for our lesson today. First, we’ll consider the meaning of God’s providence. Second, we’ll consider the manner of God’s

providence. And third, we'll consider the extent of God's providence—just what does his providence include?

Well, first, let's look at the meaning of God's providence. The basic meaning of God's providence is that he is, at all times, overseeing and directing everything that takes place. The Catechism tells us that "God's works of providence are his...preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions." Now, we've already looked at these two important words, preserving and governing. But let's look more at this great work of God.

The Bible teaches that God preserves all things. This helps us remember that nothing would exist, or continue to exist without God causing it to exist. In other words, the moon was brought into existence by God's work of creation. And we can say further, it remains in existence by his preserving work of providence. Now, this isn't just true about the moon. It's true of everything in the universe. From the largest star in the heavens above us to the smallest insect that you and I may never see, everything continues by the work of God causing it to continue.

We see this truth in the Bible. In Hebrews, chapter 1, and verse 3, we read about the divine Son of God, Lord Jesus Christ, "Who," the Bible says, "being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power." Notice that last part, that it is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, the eternal and divine Son of God, who is upholding all things by the word of his power. This means that he is the one giving existence to everything else that is. He is keeping everything from falling apart or ceasing to exist. This is the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who is upholding all things. We could say it this way—if he stopped this work of providence, if he stopped upholding all things, everything would stop existing. He maintains it. He supports it. He gives it existence every moment, everything from angels and men, to mountains and valleys, to stars and planets, to creatures like elephants, or, as bid as they are, blue whales, to mice, and other things. And indeed, everything continues, only because God is sustaining it.

This is not all. The Bible teaches that God not only preserves these things, but that he governs all things. He rules over them. He ensures they are accomplishing his purpose. This general truth is stated in Psalm 103, and verse 19. It is there that we read, "The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all." The Lord is set as a King upon his throne over all that is in this world. He's ruling, he's directing, he's causing all things to carry out his perfect will.

Now, if you remember, an earlier Question asked, "What are the decrees of God?" And you'll remember that God made a plan for everything that takes place. God's works of providence are his current carrying out of his plan. This is his work. He's made his plan from eternity past, and providence is carrying out of that plan in time and history. He is the King who has decreed what will come to pass, and he is the King who carries out what he's decreed to come to pass. You can see this in many places in Scripture, but there's a memorable testimony of this very truth. There was a very great king in the ancient near-east known as Nebuchadnezzar. And in his pride, he thought that he was in control of many things. He thought of his kingdom as superior to all other kingdoms, and he took the credit for all that had come to pass. However, he was brought to acknowledge that only God is in absolute control of all things. You can read Nebuchadnezzar's story in Daniel chapter 1, through Daniel chapter 4. And in that last chapter, toward the end of the history recorded there, that after Nebuchadnezzar was brought very low before God, and then brought back to see the truth, that he confessed, in chapter 4, verse 35, "He"—speaking of God—"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?" Notice, it's God only who does according to his will, both in

heaven, and in the earth. Nebuchadnezzar, as great as he was, was brought to see that there is only one who does all that he wants, and that “none”—as he said—“can stay his hand”—none can keep him from doing it. There’s only one who governs, and that one is God.

Well, let’s move to our second point, the manner of God’s providence. We’ve seen that he preserves and governs all things, how is it that he preserves and governs all things? We can imagine an evil king governing his kingdom. And we would know that if there was an evil king, he would rule unjustly and wickedly. His kingdom would be a miserable place. How is it that God rules the universe he made? Well, you should already have some ability to answer that, when you think back to “What is God?” And all of those attributes that we discussed—his perfections—those are shown in all that he does, and this Answer clarifies that very point. Remember, it speaks in this Answer that he “preserves and governs” in such a way that is “most holy, wise, and powerful.”

Well, this is important, first, because it is telling us what the Bible says, as we’ll see. And also because it is great encouragement. Nothing that God ever does, or has done, or will do is done in sin, or in wickedness, or without having been thought out perfectly, and without wisely being established and carried out according to the truth. This is something we praise him for in Psalm 145, and verse 17, “The LORD is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works.” It’s not only that God is himself righteous, but in all that he does, all of his ways, and in all of his works, he is righteous and holy. Everything that God does is done by him in holiness.

Now, this may cause us to entertain a question—what about the sins of men? We see that God is sovereign over all things. We see he preserves and governs all things. And now we see that he does so in a most wise, and holy, and powerful way. How is it then that God rules over the sinful men who he’s made, and who he’s ordained to carry out his will. There are questions like this which are hard for us to answer to the full satisfaction of our curiosity. There are things that are just beyond us. We remember that, in the book of Deuteronomy, we’re told that the revealed things belong unto us—those things which he’s declared in his Word—and the secret things belong to God (Deuteronomy 29:29). So we may have many questions, not just about this particular topic, but many others, and in the end, we can’t fully answer. But we do have enough in the Bible to give us sufficient cause to trust God, and to see that he is not the one who is guilty of sin. What we know is that God is in complete control of all that happens.

But we also know, as the Bible is clear in testifying, that he’s not the one who’s committing the sin, nor is he forcing man to do something that is against that man’s will. God is not creating sinful desires within men, though he’s sovereign in his ruling over them. He actually restrains the sins of men. He’s also able to use even the sins of men for his purpose that is great and good. So while he is sovereign over all that happens, he is—we ought to remember—holy as he sovereignly rules over all that happens. So he is holy, and pure, even when he’s ruling over the sins of men, and directing them for his purpose of bringing glory to himself and salvation to his people.

We can see this very truth in the glorious display of these things in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can see this in part of Peter’s sermon in Acts chapter 2. In verses 22 through 24, we read, what he preached, “Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.” Now there is much here, but notice in particular what is said in verse 23. Jesus Christ was “delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God.” God had decreed that this particular act



should happen, and he was carrying out, in his providential work, this decree, and did bring it to pass. However, Peter says, of the men who carried it out, “Ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.” So we can see several things, but notice, they, those who were guilty of falsely accusing and crucifying the Lord Jesus Christ, were themselves active in a sinful and a responsible way. They weren’t simply machines preprogrammed to do something mindlessly without the engagement of their wills. They were responsible people, sinfully fulfilling their sinful desires in their wicked actions against God.

Now, the good news is that God ruled even in this, and brought to pass our salvation through Jesus Christ. There’s much that we may not understand, whether of this and how God sovereignly works, and yet man is guilty of his own sin, and there are many questions to which we will not receive answers. However, we see again, and again this clear and undeniable truth that God is holy, as he governs even the sinful actions of men. And so, as we learn to trust him who is good, and holy, and just in all that he is and in all that he does, let us learn indeed to trust him. Not to judge him by our standards, or by our unanswered questions, but rather to receive what is clearly testified of in his Word.

Well, you’ll also notice that his providence is “most wise.” You can actually see this in what we’ve just considered in Peter’s sermon. With great wisdom, God ruled over the actions of men who were intending to destroy Christ, and doubtlessly Satan intending to overthrow God, and yet with great wisdom, God ruled over those things to bring forth salvation. If you think more about this, you will wonder at how wise God is in all of his plans and actions. He had been working and governing all of history to bring forth his Son, as the Scriptures say, “in the fulness of time.” And so God had been preparing and working, and things that would pass our notice were yet important for the bringing to pass of these things. If you read through the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ, you can wonder at the names that are listed there. And some of their stories we know in the Scripture, and all of those were being woven together wisely and in a holy way powerfully by God, to bring forth his perfect purpose. He was bringing together all manner of strands of prophecy and history, so that he would fulfill his perfect plan of salvation.

Now, this isn’t only true of his great work of salvation in Christ. This is true in all that he does. He is working together all things in a most wise way that will cause us to praise his name for all eternity. When Paul was reflecting upon God’s great work of salvation, his plan carried out in history, he was brought to praise God, in Romans 11, and verse 33. He says there, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!”

Notice that all of this demands immeasurable power. How else could God be ruling the stars and planets above us? How else could he be directing the history of nations, and kingdoms, and empires to accomplish all his holy will? How else could he be ruling over angels, and demons, and men. All of this demands perfect power—ultimate power. Indeed the Scriptures assert this in the passage we’ve already referenced—Hebrews 1, and verse 3, tells us that God does all this, “upholding all things by the word of his power.” That same Word which brought forth all things is the very Word that upholds all things.

Well, finally, let us look at our third point, the extent of God’s providence. Just what does God’s providence include? Some may be tempted to think that God’s providence is only over his good creatures and their good actions. In fact, some have thought that they honor God by saying that he isn’t in control of the evil actions of Satan and sinners. But what kind of comfort would it be to think that sin and evil are outside of God’s control? What kind of comfort would it be for you to

think that God isn't in control of the very ones who despise you? This would mean that something is at work that is beyond the oversight and the power of our God. The Catechism tells us that God's providence extends to "all his creatures and all their actions."

This is true of great things, and little things. Notice how, in Matthew 10, verses 29 through 31, Christ teaches this. He says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing?"—by that, he's saying, look how insignificant they are—"and one of them," he says, "shall not fall on the ground without your Father." He says further, "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows." Think of what he's just said. Sparrows which fly past us today, and we don't think much of—Christ says their life and their death is in the complete control of our Father. He speaks of the hairs upon our head, and says every single strand of hair is known by our Father—not one falls from our head without the Father's knowledge and control.

Well, this is true as well of weather, and wars, and sickness, and health, and other things. This doesn't mean that we understand everything that happens. We will often be challenged by the things that God does. We'll be left with questions at times. However, it gives us reason to trust him. Remember, he is in control of everything. And remember, the one who is in control is most holy, most wise, and most powerful. Even when he brings challenging circumstances into our lives, we have a good and sure cause to trust him. In fact, notice what Paul writes in Romans 8, verse 28. He says, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." In the Greek, it's even stronger. It's not just that these work together, but it is that God is working them together for good. He's at work, even in the difficulties, and has a good purpose that will come to be clearly discerned, if not in this life, then in the life to come.

Well, as we close, think for a moment how this Biblical teaching of God's providence gives us great cause to praise the Lord. It's a display of his infinite wisdom, and his infinite power, all being exercised in a most holy way, and one day we will see the outworking of these things with perfection. I encourage you, after this lesson, to read the life of Joseph in the book of Genesis. You should read Genesis chapters 37 through 50, which captures Joseph's life. And as you do so, you'll be challenged by the difficult trials Joseph suffered. Yet read to the very end, and you'll see how Joseph testifies of the praise of God through his good providence. He was able to say to the very brothers who sold him into slavery, "But as for you, ye thought even against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." Well, this is true of all of God's providence.

And finally, knowing that God is in control of all things is a great source of comfort and peace to the believer. I don't know what trials you have suffered or are suffering, and I don't know what trials you will suffer, but I do know that you will face them. I do know that they will come. And they'll be difficult, and they'll be sad; many will be confusing. But when they happen, you'll be tempted to complain, or distrust God, or even blame God, and carry on in such a way. However, this Biblical truth is of great help in those moments. It's then that you and I are to remember that God is sovereign. He is at work, and what he's doing, though we don't understand it all now, in time to come, we will see most clearly how this is not only for his glory, but even for the good of his believing people. So what should we do, but come to humble ourselves and trust this great and glorious God.