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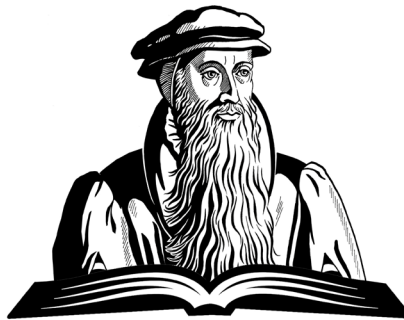
by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

Lecture #9

God's Special Providence

Towards Man

Catechism Question 12



The John Knox Institute
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Lecture #9

God's Special Providence Towards Man

Question 12: *What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created?*

Answer: *When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.*

We have seen that God's providence extends to all creatures and all their actions. This includes actions that we think are insignificant, but it also includes the most significant actions. Today our lesson focuses on one of the most significant works that have ever been performed, and one aspect of God's providence which focuses upon our humanity. It focuses upon humankind. Particularly you'll notice that the Question before us, Question 12 of the Shorter Catechism, asks this question, "What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate he was created?" This Question is asking about the first of mankind, namely, Adam, and particularly when it was that he was made. What special arrangement did God make with him in the beginning? Well, the Answer is as follows: "When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death."

Now, we have a few important words in the Answer, particularly, the first of which is "covenant." This is an important word throughout the Bible. When you read through the Bible, you'll come across this word again, and again, especially in the Old Testament, but again, you'll see it in the New Testament. It's also important throughout our Catechism. The word "covenant" refers to a special agreement, an arrangement that leads to a relationship established between two or more individuals. In a covenant there are often promises and responsibilities. There are with those, blessings for keeping those requirements. And those blessings come by way of what's promised, and there are consequences, if one fails to keep such responsibilities as are agreed to. Now, we'll talk more about this in a moment, but it's important to understand these parts of a covenant.

Now notice also that there a word "condition." The word "condition" refers to a requirement that brings to pass something else. We could think, for instance, of a thirsty person. When someone's thirsty, they want their thirst quenched. Now a thirsty person doesn't just need to know where

the water is. That person must drink the water. And drink enough so as to satisfy his thirst. That is the requirement, in other words, for quenching his thirst. In other words, the condition for quenching his thirst is drinking the water.

Now, this Question and Answer are bringing us back to the very beginning of Genesis. And you'll remember that Genesis 2 tells us about how God made man male and female—Adam and Eve. Well in that chapter, we also see that there was one tree that God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And you'll remember, as well, there was another tree, the tree of life, as well as many others, fruit-bearing trees that they could have eaten from.

Well, we'll see that God had given an important commandment to Adam, and that this command was actually part of a covenant. This covenant held forth life and death, not only for Adam, nor only for Adam and Eve, but as we'll see later, for all humanity. Well, to help us see what this covenant was, let's look at three things in our lesson today. First, let's look at when this covenant was made; second, what this covenant established; and third, what this covenant required.

Well, for our first point, when this covenant was made—the Catechism tells us that this happened “when God had created man.” In other words, God entered into this covenant at the time God created man. Now, when we read Genesis 2, we don't see the word “covenant.” We can't turn to Genesis, chapter 2, or 1, or 3, or anywhere else and it's saying in so many words, “God entered into a covenant of life with Adam.” Now, this shouldn't bother us too much. You'll remember, as we talked about, we don't find the word “Trinity” in the Bible, but we do find the meaning of that word in the Bible. Well, it's similar here. We don't see the word “covenant,” however, we see the parts of a covenant, and when we see the parts of something, we can say that we find that thing that's being described.

For example, if I told you that there was a young boy who was sitting at a desk, and reading a book, and while he was reading, he was then working on a calculator. And he would pick up his pencil, and write on a piece of paper, and then double check what he's done, and reviewing all that had been accomplished. I don't have to use the word “study,” but you would know right away that what's being described is a young boy studying, and by using a calculator, he's probably studying math. If I describe the parts, I can describe it in such a way that you know what's being described. Or if I told you that there was a young lady and young man who were gathered together in front of a congregation, and behind them was a minister, and I told you that the young man was promising certain things to the young lady, and the young lady was, in turn, promising certain things to the young man. And at the end of their exchange of promises, the minister said, “I now pronounce you to be man and wife.” I don't need to use the word “wedding” or “marriage” for you to know what is taking place.

Well, the same is true here in Genesis, chapter 2. We don't have the word “covenant,” but we have the description of a covenant. We can see this in Genesis, chapter 2:15 through 17. God gave a commandment after he placed Adam in the garden. We read there, “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it.” So here, God gave a commandment to Adam. And additionally, he told him of a consequence if he failed to keep that commandment. He said, “For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” And in this warning, there's also a promise to be discerned. If he did not eat of this tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he wouldn't die—he would live. So we have God giving a commandment, and in that, he's giving a promise. If the commandment were kept, Adam should enjoy life. If the commandment were

disobeyed, he would bring death upon himself. Now we shouldn't overlook the point that there was another tree. Verse 9 tells us that, "Out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil."

Now remember what we mentioned earlier—a covenant is an agreement between two or more individuals. Here, we have God holding forth something to Adam—there's the two individuals. We also remember that in a covenant, there are promises. What's being promised?—well, life is being promised. And likewise there are responsibilities, and so God is telling Adam, "You're not to eat of this tree of the knowledge of good and evil." And there are also, in a covenant, consequences. The consequences were life if obeyed, and death if disobeyed. So though Genesis 2 does not use the term "covenant," it displays the parts of a covenant very clearly. Now, when did all of this take place? It took place as soon as God had made man and placed him in the garden. In other words, it took place at creation. So God established this covenant with Adam at the time he created him. This is why our Catechism says, "When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him."

Now, for our second point, what this covenant established—every covenant establishes something. For instance, when a young man and a young woman enter into a covenant of marriage, a new relationship is formed. A new relationship is established. They're now married. They weren't husband and wife, but through that covenant, now they have established a new relationship where they are husband and wife. Now, the same is true in this covenant. What was it that this covenant established? Notice the Catechism answers, "When God had created a covenant of life with him." God established a way for Adam to have access to life.

Now, we usually use the word "life" and think merely in a physical way. But in the Bible, oftentimes the word "life" is much more full than that, and here, it particularly is. The idea of life is not just referring to physical life. The word here used, "death"—"in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die," is not just speaking of physical death, but rather, death in its fulness, and thus, life in its fulness. You can see this in God's Word. Genesis 2:17 says, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."

Now, as you probably know, Adam ate of that tree. He did not immediately die physically, however, he did indeed die. How so?—well, because, as we were saying, life is more than physical. Life is spiritual as well. You'll remember, that when God had made man, he didn't just make a physical thing, but he made us to be body and soul, and to bear God's image. Well, Adam ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and died—his soul died. This is why Paul, in Ephesians 2, is able to speak of us who are dead in our sins and transgressions (verse 1). Adam's soul no longer lived and functioned as it was supposed to. It was no longer doing what it was supposed to do. Additionally, Adam no longer lived in fellowship with the God of life. As we'll see, after they had eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God drew near, and what did Adam and Eve do?—they fled away. They were no longer in fellowship with the God of life. And eventually, Adam's physical body would perish. The Catechism will describe all of this in later Questions and Answers, as "the state of sin and misery." We'll consider that in time to come.

But for now, notice that the covenant was holding forth a promise of life, by which Adam should continue in physical and spiritual life, and fellowship with the living God. This is what God had established, a way by which Adam should enjoy all that to the fullest. Now, we can't fully know exactly what would have happened, had Adam not eaten of the tree of the knowledge of

good and evil, or if instead he had eaten of the tree of life. We know enough to say he would have secured that life that was promised to him, physical and spiritual life, in living fellowship with the living God—truly a way of life. It is enough for us to realize that this would have been far better than what happened by disobeying God.

Well, our third point, what this covenant required—what was Adam to do in order to maintain and secure such life? Notice that the Catechism says that God “entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience.” In other words, the covenant God established required Adam to obey God perfectly. This is why God is so clear when he’s speaking to Adam: “In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die.” There would not be a second chance to fulfill this covenant. Adam couldn’t say, “I messed up, and I’ll now keep it.” It demanded perfect obedience. Adam was demanded to obey God without the slightest fault.

Well, perhaps you’re in school, and at school, you can pass a test by getting an eighty-five percent, or you can get perhaps a ninety percent—nine out of ten questions will allow you to advance to the next lesson. Or perhaps that overall grade would allow you to advance to the next grade. When Adam was given this test, he was required to get a hundred percent obedience. To miss even a little, was to fail the test—it was to violate the terms of the covenant. Before we think that this is unfair, remember several things.

First and foremost, God is worthy of our perfect obedience in and of himself. Adam, as a creature, owed God what God had demanded. That’s because God is wise, and powerful, holy, just, and good; he’s merciful and faithful. God deserves perfect obedience. Second, remember that, as the Bible tells us, God made man upright. Adam was made as a righteous creature. He had knowledge, and righteousness, and holiness. We’ll look more at this in the future, but remember that God made man good. Adam was not already given to sin. It wasn’t as if God came to a sinful creature and said, “You owe me perfect obedience if you’re going to gain life.” But he had come to Adam, who had not yet sinned, and who had knowledge, and many benefits, and many privileges. And third, remember that Adam had everything he needed. He was in a garden with beauty and nourishment, and not least of all, he was in a garden with fellowship with God. And likewise, God made Eve to support and help him. Adam had all that he needed. And last, remember that God had been clear to Adam. When we remember all this, we see that God was not unfair to demand perfect obedience. In fact, to do anything but perfectly obey God, would demonstrate how wicked such a creature was. You’ll notice that the Catechism calls this covenant, “a covenant of life.” It does so, because it is describing the covenant by what it promised. What did the covenant promise? What did God hold forth to Adam?—he held forth life to Adam. So it was a covenant of life.

Well, elsewhere, for example, in the *Westminster Confession*, in chapter 7, this same covenant is called, “the covenant of works.” These terms are describing the same covenant. The covenant of life is one way of describing the same covenant that elsewhere is described as the covenant of works. Different terms, but the same thing. The term “covenant of life” describes this covenant by virtue of what was promised and held forth, while the term “covenant of works” looks at the same covenant based on what was required. We can put these ideas together, and say that this covenant that God established with Adam in the garden promised life by Adam’s works. Had Adam obeyed God, he would have secured life.

But notice that was a warning. The Catechism expresses this, in the event that man failed to give perfect obedience, it would bring forth the pain of death. This is the very thing that God said, “In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die.” This is a very clear and a sober warning. Whatever else Adam could have said, he could not have said, “God, you didn’t tell me what the

consequences would be.”

Well, you likely already know that Adam failed to keep this covenant. We’ll see this more clearly in our next lesson. To Adam and all his descendants was held forth the promise of life, and if he had obeyed God, he would have secured life for himself, and as we will see, for all those who would come from him.

Well, at least we can see what a wicked thing sin is. Someone might ask, “But shouldn’t have Adam obeyed God even without this covenant?” And of course, the answer is, Yes, absolutely! So what is the point of this covenant then? Well, Adam should have obeyed God regardless of this covenant, but the covenant added a special privilege and encouragement to Adam for securing and continuing in a state of physical and spiritual life with God. The covenant was adding an encouragement and a great benefit. God was drawing near to Adam in order to encourage him, and to warn him against the consequences of sin. And so even in this covenant—whether it’s called covenant of life or covenant of works—this covenant is a display of the great kindness of God.

Well, as we close, I want to challenge you to think well on this truth. We will see that Adam ultimately sinned, and in doing so, he brought forth the consequence of which he was warned. However, we will see as well that this had a consequence upon all his descendents. It explains why the world is as it is today. This is the beginning of a sad part of our history as a human race. It is also the beginning of a section in the Catechism that deals with the consequences of sin. In our next lesson, we will look more closely at what Adam did, and how he sinned against God. And after that, we will look more generally at what sin is itself. And after that, we will spend time thinking together on the effects of sin upon the whole world of men. All of these are sad and sobering truths. However, all of these, we ought to remember, are moving toward the very good news of Jesus Christ. And remember that Jesus Christ is the Savior of sinners. Additionally, we will see that there is another covenant—the covenant of grace. We look forward to studying that in a future lesson. So as we work through these next few lessons together and focus on our sin and misery, let us remember that they are preparing us for the excellent news of the truth of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, and all of that by God’s grace.