

The Doctrine of Providence

As I have taught this course through the years, I have noted how relevant this has been for me. Every time I come back to this particular topic there is a personal note in the margin of my *Institutes* of what is going on in my life. It is almost like a little diary of the significance and importance of God's providence in our lives. In fact, back in 1989, when I was first diagnosed with lymphoma, I had to miss a class I was teaching on the *Institutes*. The topic was God's providence. When I came back after missing that class, I was able to pick up with this wonderful treatment of God's providence. Let us start with a prayer from John Calvin as we do each day. This prayer has particular relevance to the subject at hand. Let us pray.

“Grant, Almighty God, that since we are here exposed to so many evils which suddenly arise like violent tempests, O grant that with hearts raised up to heaven, we may yet acquiesce in Thy hidden providence even though we are so tossed here and there according to the judgment of our flesh yet to remain fixed in this truth that Thou wouldst have us believe: that all things are governed by Thee and that nothing takes place except through Thy will so that in the greatest confusions we may always clearly see Thy hand and that Thy counsel is altogether right and perfectly and singularly wise and just. And may we ever call upon Thee and flee to this port that we are tossed here and there in order that Thou mayest, nevertheless, always sustain us by Thine hand until we shall at length be received into that blessed rest which has been procured for us by the blood of Thine only begotten Son.” Amen.

I have been reading a book called *Sea Room: An Island Life in the Hebrides*. It is an account of a man who spends a lot of his time on three very tiny islands. Each island is only a few acres, and they are out in the Minch—that is, the water that separates the Isle of Skye from the Islands of Harris and Lewis. I am interested in Scottish things, so I am going through this book about these little islands. Last night, I came upon an incident reported by the writer. This took place in 1894 on the Island of Lewis. Lewis is probably the most Presbyterian part of Scotland. The little capital of Lewis has about 12 churches, and 10 of the 12 are Presbyterian churches. There is a little storefront Catholic Church and a tiny but beautiful Anglican church, but all the rest are Presbyterian. Here is the story: “Is there much fishing in this lock now?” a Lewis crofter, or farmer, was asked by one of the investigating commissioners who came up from London in 1894. “There used to be when herring came into it,” he said. “There is little fishing except when there are herring. Do you know the reason why the herring are not coming now?” “Providence,” the crofter said, “the administration of the Creator.” So, the London investigator got a little lesson in theology. But, I want to keep that story in mind because it illustrates a number of things that I want to talk about in relation to Calvin's doctrine of providence.

Calvin follows the doctrine of creation with the doctrine of providence. These two are extremely important to him and important to be linked. He says, “We see the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception.” You will notice that this Presbyterian crofter got it just right when he said, “Providence, the administration of the Creator.” Providence is the work of the Creator. It is the continuing government of the Creator—the one who created all things now preserves and governs all things. There is one book on Calvin's theology that says, “At this point in his *Institutes* he comes closer to the tone of ecstasy than he does anywhere else in the *Institutes*.” And that may well be. There are plenty of places where Calvin rises to celebration or ecstasy, but he certainly does that in his treatment here. For instance, in Book I, chapter 16, section 1, he says, “God sustains, nourishes, and cares for everything He has made even to the last sparrow.” You can see Calvin rejoicing as he wrote those words.

Let us look at Calvin's definition of providence. In order to do that, I will go through a number of steps. Calvin works on a definition. We can organize it beginning with this statement: "It is more than foreknowledge; it is government." Providence is not simply God knowing beforehand what is going to happen. Calvin says in Book I, chapter 16, section 4, "God governs all events, thus it pertains no less to His hands than to His eyes." In fact, the word providence really means "to see beforehand." However, it is more than that. You might say that providence is more than providence in Calvin's view. It is more than just seeing beforehand what is going to happen, which would be amazing enough—that God can see all through history and all that was going to happen down to this very moment. Calvin says, "It is not merely seeing what is going to happen, but it is governing what happens." So, it pertains to His hands. He is controlling all things as well as seeing what lies ahead. He does not just see what is going to happen; He determines what is going to happen.

The second point in Calvin's definition is that it is more than permission, but it is also direction. Calvin deals here with the possibility of using the word "permission." Is it acceptable? Can we say that God permits and directs some things? Can we make that kind of distinction? Calvin loves and generally follows Augustine. He says that Augustine frequently used the term "permission." Augustine said that God permitted Adam and Eve to sin or permitted the devil to do such and such. Actually, Calvin will occasionally use the expression too. Augustine's term is best understood from this sentence in Augustine's *In Corridian*: "For it would not be done if He did not permit it, yet He does not unwillingly permit it but willingly." That is the understanding of "permission" that Calvin picks up on—that, yes, you can use "permission." You can say that God permits things to happen in this world, but He does not permit things unwillingly but willingly. In other words, use "permission" in a strong sense, not in a weak sense. Calvin does not like what he calls "mere permission," or "bear permission," or indolent permission." He uses those words to qualify "permission." He says, "If that is what we mean, it is not true of God." We can use "permission" in that weak sense. Your child sometimes wants to do something, but you do not want your child to do it because you do not think it is good. However, your child has a way of pestering you until finally you will say, "Oh, go ahead and do it." You gave permission, but it was not willing permission. It was simply giving in. It is mere permission, weak permission, or indolent permission. Calvin says that God does not do that. God does not just throw up His hands and say, "Oh, go ahead and do it," because He gets tired of hearing about it. The term "permission," then, can be used, but God's providence is more than that. The term "permission" does not absolve God from responsibility for what happens. You cannot say, "Well, I will use permission here so that God is not really involved in what happens." That weak use of the word weakens God's authority, and it absolves God from responsibility. In Calvin's treatment, good and evil are not related ultimately to the will of God in exactly the same way, as we will see. Calvin says the concept of "permission" is not accurate or helpful. You can use it, but use it in the right way as Calvin does in Book I, chapter 14, section 7 where he says, "Satan carries out only those things which have been divinely permitted to him." Calvin uses "permission," but he uses it in the strong sense, not in the weak sense.

The third point is that it is more than general; it is particular. Here, Calvin is dealing with the philosophers who teach a kind of universal providence. Later, Calvin would include the deists in his critique here. Calvin was not a deist. Deists believed in a universal providence—that is, God, in some general way, is superintending, but He is not really involved in the small points in human history or the history of this world. The deists believed that God created the universe, put laws into effect, and then turned His back on it. This is sometimes called the "watchmaker" view. (You make the watch, wind it up, and then ignore it.) But, that is not Calvin's view of providence. It is more than general. It is particular. John T. McNeill, in a book that he wrote called *The History and Character of Calvinism*, which is still a very useful book for Calvinist history, says, "Calvin's world from stars to insects, from archangels to infants, is the realm of God's sovereignty." So, you see how particular it gets. Providence

includes the small things as well as the big things. As we read the chapters that we have studied for today, we get that illustrated very clearly. Book I, chapter 16, section 5 says, "Not one drop of rain falls without His sure command." You can see how particular that is. Calvin also says, "The flight of birds is governed by God's definite plan." You can stand outside at night and watch the birds when they are all over the sky. Nothing looks more chaotic and unplanned than these birds swirling all over the place, but according to Calvin, the flight of the birds is planned by God. In Book I, chapter 16, section 7, Calvin says, "No wind ever arises or increases except by God's expressed command." So, you might say that nothing is too small to be outside of God's providence or government.

One way to illustrate what I have said so far is to think of the African-American spiritual, "He Has the Whole Wide World in His Hands." The spiritual goes on to say, "He has the tiny little baby in His hands," which brings us to the next point. It is more than nature. You might say up until this point that Calvin has said God controls nature, but he has not said anything yet about mankind. However, it is more than nature. He also governs mankind and even, according to Calvin, the plans and intentions of men (Book 1, chapter 16, section 8). He governs everything that people do—not only their actions but also their plans and their intentions. Calvin says God even governs the sinful actions and intentions of people. So, the spiritual gets it right. Not only does He have the tiny, little baby in His hands, but He also has the sinning man in His hands. That spiritual is a wonderful statement of Calvin's view of God's providence.

Calvin relentlessly and even enthusiastically keeps on going until he has included everything and excluded nothing from his view of providence or the government of God. He is well aware that this raises questions in people's minds, but he wants to be absolutely sure that we know what he is talking about first of all. One of the questions it raises is "Is this fate?" How does Calvin deal with this objection? If everything is fixed and determined and God knows, plans, and governs everything that happens, is that not fatalistic? Calvin says no. It is interesting how he deals with this. He says, "Fate is a pagan term. It is not a Christian term. Providence is a biblical concept. Beside that, fate is impersonal."

The Stoic doctrine of fate presupposed that all events were governed by the necessity of nature, which contained within itself an intimately related series of causes and effects. It is impersonal. It is a machine cranking out whatever it is cranking out. There is no person behind it all. So, there is quite a difference between fate and Calvin's view of providence because providence is personal. It is the Christian doctrine of a holy and loving God and His personal governance of His universe. If somebody said to Calvin, "Your view is fate," he would say, "No, it is not fate. That is not a Christian word. It is a pagan term. And, beside that, fate means an impersonal, mindless ordering of what happens. I am talking about the government of all things by a good, holy, just, and righteous God."

Let us sum it all up. You do not find this precisely stated anywhere in the *Institutes* like I have stated it here, but putting all Calvin's thoughts together, we get something like this: God's providence is His watchful, effective, active, ceaseless, total, detailed, personal, loving, wise, and holy governing of this world. That is the definition of providence.

Next, let us come to the application of this definition. I am going to ask the question, as Calvin does, "How does God's providence work?" We know what it is now, but we will look at it more closely and see how it works. Calvin says, in Book I, chapter 17, section 1, "...sometimes through an intermediary, sometimes without an intermediary, sometimes contrary to every intermediary." So, providence can work in different ways. I will try to illustrate what Calvin is saying.

Sometimes, God's providence works through an intermediary. I was talking earlier about my medical situation. I think God's providence has worked in my life to keep me alive to this point through intermediaries. I have gone to the hospital hundreds of times, I have taken all kinds of medicines, and I have had all kinds of radiation surgeries and things like that. So, God's purpose is to keep me alive up to this point and for who knows how long. That is in God's hands. God has kept me alive through intermediaries. God often works that way. Calvin uses the expression "second causes." Sometimes God works without an intermediary. It is entirely possible for God to heal someone who cannot go to the doctor or who does not have access to medicine. God can heal directly if He so chooses. In that case, the work of God is without an intermediary and sometimes contrary to every intermediary. The raising of Lazarus from the dead is an example of God working contrary to an intermediary. The intermediaries or second causes were operative there. Whatever it was that caused Lazarus to die was an intermediary. It produced the death of this man. When he was dead, Christ came and raised him from the dead contrary to those intermediaries (whatever killed Lazarus, the scientific facts that were operative in his death). Those facts would have worked to keep Lazarus dead, but contrary to those facts, Christ worked to bring him back to life.

This third possibility, sometimes contrary to every intermediary, is what we would call a miracle. I suppose some people would call my second point a miracle. If you want to call God healing someone without medical assistance a miracle, it is fine with me. But, this third point is definitely a miracle in the full biblical sense of the word—that Christ raises a person from the dead or Jesus walks on water. The intermediary in the latter incident is gravity, but in this case, God works contrary to the intermediary so the intermediary does not work in this miracle. Well, I will not get into the question of whether or not this still happens, because Calvin does not get into it here. Actually, in the dedicatory letter to Francis I, one of the objections that Calvin says is raised to the Protestant truth is "You do not have any miracles. Catholics have miracles. So, your religion cannot be true." Calvin says, "Oh, yes, we have miracles. We have plenty of miracles. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus walked on the water..." and he goes through the whole catalog of biblical miracles. So, at that point, he seems to restrict his understanding of miracles to what happened in Bible times and not later miracles.

But, getting back to how God's providence works, He sometimes works through an intermediary, sometimes without an intermediary, and sometimes contrary to an intermediary. Once he has established that, Calvin wants to be sure that we understand that even when God works through an intermediary it is still God who works. In other words, God works through second causes, and we acknowledge those second causes. However, we do not say then, "It is not God who has worked." Calvin's illustration here is that light existed before the sun was created. In the Genesis account, light is before the sun. Calvin's point is that the sun is merely the instrument that God uses because He so wills. The light comes from God, but then God chose to use the sun as the source of the light for our world. Yet, it is still coming from God. The light comes from God, but it comes from the sun. When we say that the light comes from the sun, we are not to say that it does not come from God. So, Calvin applies it that way, and he also applies it to our eating food. He says, "It is not the bread that nourishes but God's secret blessing." He does not mean that the bread does not nourish. We eat the food, and we are nourished, fed, and strengthened by the food. But, Calvin does not want to stop there. He wants to say it is God's secret blessing that enables us to eat that food and be nourished by it. For Calvin, second causes are real but not independent. They do not exist apart from the personal involvement of God. It is chance, not second causes, that Calvin banishes from the universe with his view of providence.

What does God's providence do? It does everything, does it not? If it is total, complete, and particular, there is nothing that it does not do. Calvin wants to stress that all of this that God is doing in this world reveals His concern for the whole human race but especially His vigilance in ruling the Church (Book I,

chapter 17, section 1). It is rather interesting and impressive to think about that. This really means that everything that happens in this world is for the benefit of the human race, or it reflects God's concern for the human race. We cannot always understand that. In fact, we very seldom can understand that. Calvin says not only is it done for the whole human race but especially for the Church. That is astounding when you think about it. Everything is working together for good, for the Church. We can use the text that way. Everything is working together for the good of God's Church. Calvin asks, "How much can we understand?" We cannot understand very much. The order, reason in, and necessity of those things that happen for the most part lie hidden in God's purpose and are not apprehended by human opinion (Book I, chapter 17, section 9). In Book I, chapter 17, section 1, he does say, "God's fatherly favor and beneficence or severity of judgment often shines forth in the whole course of providence. Nevertheless, sometimes the causes of events are hidden."

When we put these two thoughts together, we get something like this: providence is not totally mysterious. As Christians look at the world, we are not totally baffled. God's purpose, judgment, and blessing shine forth in its broader outlines. So, in the whole flow of history, we can say that we can see God's judgment at work, we can see God blessing and preserving the church, and we can see Him judging sin but just in the big picture. When we get down to the particulars, what God is doing then is obscure or hidden from us. We cannot just look at some event in history and always be sure we know what that means. We cannot always be sure what God is doing, so we must cherish moderation so that we do not try to make God render account to us.

When we come up against our limited understanding, Calvin says we must be moderate. We must not demand that God tell us what He has not chosen to tell us, and we must reverently adore Him. So, once again we come to worship. We will reach this point many times in the *Institutes*. When our understanding fails, we do not, in frustration, hammer on the door of heaven and demand that God reveal to us what He is doing, but we fall on our knees in worship. How do you look at providence? You look at it as God doing everything that is done in different ways—sometimes using second causes, sometimes working without them. He does it all for the benefit of humanity and especially the good of the Church. It is a matter of faith, not understanding. There is some understanding involved but not total understanding.

There is a Puritan named John Flavel who wrote a book on providence in which he said that providence is like a Hebrew word. It can only be read backward. We can look back and see what God is doing or has done. Flavel may have overstated it a bit, as the Puritans often tend to do. Providence is more like some Hebrew words that I look at that cannot be read at all—at least not by me! That is not a good illustration for any of our Hebrew scholars, but I am puzzled. I do not know what it means. Even as we look back at history, it is often impossible to say exactly what was happening there. So, God's providence is often a mystery even though we can see the in the broader outlines the general scope of what God is doing. We know that God is judging sin, but He does not judge it completely in this life. This teaches us that there is a judgment to come, and God blesses the righteous, who do not appear to be blessed, which teaches us that there is a heaven to come. So, even the limitations we have in understanding God's providence are positive lessons to point us to the future.

What is the effect of the doctrine of God's providence in our lives? First, let me say this. It does not lead us into an easy, superficial optimism. It does not enable us to say, "Everything is working out. God is in control." It does not allow us to have a casual view of things—that God is in His heaven and all is right with the world. All is not right with the world, and we know that. We see awful things, and we are disturbed and concerned. As Christians (or as Calvinists) we do not have an easy, superficial optimism.

We have a Christian optimism, but that is quite different. I suppose one time in history people could have had more of a positive view, but it is hard to adopt that kind of view right now.

Second, it does not relieve us of responsibility or prudence. You cannot say, "Since what God is doing is going to be done anyway, it does not matter what I do." We are not excused from prudence, since human precaution itself is one of the means God uses to preserve life. In other words, God tends to preserve our lives. One of the ways that He does that is to use our common sense, our prudence. We go to the doctor when we are sick. We drive carefully when it is icy. We do not say, "Well, God is in control, so I will just get in my car and speed along the highway at top speed. I know that I can hit some ice and crash my car." We cannot say that. We have to exercise the prudence and precaution that God would have us do. In Book I, chapter 17, part 4, Calvin says, "Therefore, if the Lord has committed to us the protection of our life, our duty is to protect it. If He offers helps, to use them; if He forewarns us of dangers, not to plunge headlong; if He makes remedies available, not to neglect them."

So, be smart, be prudent, be responsible, but also believe in the doctrine of God's providence. You see, providence is our comfort in life. It is not our guide. Our guide is God's law. God requires of us only what He commands, Calvin says in Book I, chapter 17, section 5. So, you do what you believe God is instructing you to do through His word and then you take comfort in the fact that God is in control of all things. Calvin says that providence leads us to gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things. Take a minute to think of things that have worked out well for you. Then, stop and spend a few minutes in thanksgiving and gratitude to God for those things. We can so easily take things like that for granted and not realize the goodness of God in doing so many wonderful things in our lives. Providence leads to gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things and patience in adversity. Make a list of adversities that you have experienced and exercise patience. Calvin says that there are three rules of the Christian life: one is patience, two is patience, and three is patience. So, we need to be patient.

Third, providence leads to incredible freedom from worry about the future. I do not have time to read to you Book I, chapter 17, section 10, but you read that section in which Calvin describes all the things that can go wrong. It is a pretty horrendous listing. You walk out of your house and a tile falls off the roof and kills you. So, you flee into the garden and, there, a deadly serpent attacks you. He lists all these problems, but think of how many more Calvin could have added if he lived in the twenty-first century. It is a good thing that Calvin was a Calvinist, because he had plenty to worry about even back in his time. His picture of the fragility of the human condition is impressive. As I said, we can add to that as well. So, there is plenty to worry about. Make a list of things to worry about, and then take a thick marker and put a big "X" across it all. God's providence gives us an incredible freedom of worry about the future. If you believe in God's providence, what are you worrying about?

Those are important points in helping us understand the effect of God's providence in our lives. But, we need to come now to the problem of providence because, having said all of this, we still have a big problem to deal with. Calvin insists that everything is directed by God, but that raises a real problem. People might say, "What about sin? What about evil? Is God directing, planning, and governing that?" The last chapter of Book I holds Calvin's answer: "God carries out His will while, at the same time, He remains pure from every stain."

There are two points that must be held together. The first is that God directs and governs everything. Calvin says, "Nothing is done without God's will, not even that which is against His will" (Book I, chapter 18, section 3). The other statement that must be held is this: God is not the author of sin, and mankind is responsible. How can it be that if God directs and governs everything that He is not the author of sin (because sin would be part of everything)? Calvin's answer is an interesting one. He

basically says, "God is not the author of sin because He says He is not the author of sin." Calvin says there are clear scriptural proofs, and he goes through those proofs. We know that God uses evil without being the author of evil. "God knows," Calvin says, "right well how to use evil instruments to do good." God can use evil without being the author of evil because God's purpose in using evil is to do good. Luther put it more colorfully. He said, "God can use a crooked stick to draw a straight line." So, God uses evil instruments to do good. We know that. There are plenty of references in the Bible that God is doing that.

Second, we do not know how God uses evil without being the author of evil. We do not really understand how God wills to take place what He forbids to be done. Calvin's major illustration is the death of Christ. God forbids murder, which is what the death of Christ was. It is not His will. It is against His will. However, the death of Christ was the will of God. He planned it, and it was part of His purpose. He wills to take place what He forbids to be done. He is not guilty of sin. He is not the author of sin. The sin rests upon Herod, Pilot, and us. Yet, God planned the death of Christ while at the same time forbidding murder. God is omnipotent, which means He directs everything. He is good, which means that He forbids sin. How do we put those two things together? This is where we come out in the *Institutes*. Does God, then, have two wills?

Calvin talks about God's perceptive will and His decretive will. His decretive will would be that Christ would die on the cross. His perceptive will is "You shall not murder." So, does that mean that God has two wills? Calvin says that there is a single, simple will. Behind what looks like two wills to us (decretive and perceptive), there is a single will even though we cannot plumb the depths of that will. It is deep—another hidden will, which we cannot fathom. John Murray does not particularly like that language and thinks that you should not think of a single will. However, I do not see that as a problem. We understand what Calvin is saying. What looks like two wills is really one will.

What do we have there? Do we have contradiction? Do we have mystery? Calvin says in Book I, chapter 17, section 5, "God's will is so great and boundless, and He is so great and boundless in His wisdom that He knows right well how to use evil instruments to do good." Book I, chapter 18, section 3 says, "When we do not grasp how God wills to take place what He forbids to be done, let us recall our mental incapacity and at the same time consider that the light in which God dwells is not without reason called 'unapproachable.'" So, he brings us right up to the point of mystery but does not really answer the question. He says that when you come to this point there are two things to remember. The first thing to remember is our mental incapacity. We are not able to deal with this. Second, we are to remember the fact that God dwells in light that is unapproachable. Calvin is telling us that we believe God is omnipotent and that He directs everything. We believe God is good, and He forgives sin. The way we are to believe these things is not because we understand how it can be, but we believe them by faith. Is that a copout or is that a good thing? Some people might think it is a copout, but what do you put in its place? Can you really understand how God can be good and omnipotent at the same time? A lot of people have just forsaken one or the other of those points. If God is good, He cannot be omnipotent. If God is omnipotent, He cannot be good. However, if God is both good and omnipotent (and we believe both are taught in the Bible), then the way we hold together what seems to be a contradiction, or at least a mystery, is to believe that both are true even though we cannot understand.

Next, we will look at sin and its results in the first five chapters of Book II.