

Chapter 5: Of Divine Providence

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1 Chapter 5: Of Divine Providence I

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1 25:56

Hymnal page 673
(Hymn 21?)

I was slated to teach on chapter 6 (Of the Fall of Man) but, through some unexpected Providences, I wound up trading with Ken. This may be fitting lesson for me because the doctrine of Providence is closely related to the decree of God, which I opened up a few weeks ago. I have man-centered materialism in my bones—almost instinct. And it’s only with an effort, and the Spirit’s work, that I internalize Truth. I’m normally disposed to view any specific event in my life as having little meaning unless an exegetical Scriptural case can be made to give it meaning. But a brother encouraged me to be more Christianly attuned to the works of Providence. So I trust that the Lord has used the means of Travis’ illness, along with Ken’s vacation, deliberately to put me here this morning. This Lord’s Day has been brought to you by the Lord.

Writing on the relation of the chapter 3 to chapter 5, Sam Waldron, says,

The decree is the blueprint or plan. Providence carries out the blueprint or plan by guiding the actual course of history. The decree takes place in eternity. Providence takes place in history.

Everyone is familiar with the Kuyper quote:

“There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”

Or R. C. Sproul's quote about "no maverick molecules."

One consequence that follows from this idea is that meaning is everywhere. There are no meaningless atoms—no meaningless events. We spend every day in tedious tasks, which seem inconsequential, or insignificant. We feel we've accomplished little, or nothing, and the sun begins to set. Before we're ready, it rises again, and we do it all again. Another page of homework. Another math problem. Dishes need to be done. There's no such thing as changing the baby once and for all. The car breaks down, the lawn needs mowed. It can start to feel like all is vanity. But none of it is meaningless.

This is what the Doctrine of Providence teaches. Since God is at work in all things we need to see the world as alive with meaning and purpose. For there to be meaning, there has to be mind. And *our* minds are not the source of this meaning and purpose. The Lord says "*my* purpose shall stand." So to have joy we need to think his thoughts after him. Because even we have a purpose that isn't our own. Our chief purpose is to worship and enjoy our God. If we seek to set our own purposes, meanings, and values on things, then we are at war with God.

The Shorter Catechism

Q. 11. What are God's works of providence?

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

Heidelberg Lord's Day 10 (Of God the Father)

Q 27. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. God's providence is his almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

Q 28. What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by his providence?

A. We can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love; for all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot so much as move.

1.1 The use of means

1.1.1 ¶ 1 The summary statement of the doctrine

God the good creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all His creatures and things,⁽¹⁾ from the greatest even to the least,⁽²⁾ by His most wise and holy providence, to the end for which they were created, according unto His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will; to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.⁽³⁾

1. Heb 1:3; Job 38:11; Isa 46:10-11; Ps 135:6.
2. Mt 10:29-31.
3. Eph 1:11.

First of all, notice the last clause there. All theology should lead us to praise. If this doctrine doesn't lead you to praise, you're not understanding it aright. Some people prefer a libertarian concept of free will, and an impersonal universe of pure matter and laws. They think it's the only way God can be just when bad stuff happens. It's not, by the way; we'll talk more about that in paragraph four. But what comfort is it if God is not in control, and that, therefore, every calamity, and tragedy has no purpose, or meaning. No, this doctrine of Providence is not only biblical, but it also gives hope, comfort, and matter for praise. Without this doctrine, God cannot work "all things [...] together for good."

The confession isn't just filling space when it multiplies these attributes: "wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy." They're listed because every one of those attributes (and probably others) are visible and worthy of praise in this doctrine. And just imagine if providence played out without wisdom. Or without justice and goodness. It wouldn't play out at all without power.

You'll notice the last clause isn't the only link that goes back to the doctrine of the decree. Providence is also worked out according to the "free and immutable counsel of His own will." We saw last time that the Lord decreed contingent upon, and in reference to nothing other than his own will—therefore it is free. His will is perfect in goodness, wisdom, power, and justice—therefore it is immutable.

It says God, "doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern." Let's think about those four words for a bit. I want to flesh them out by looking at a number of

Scripture passages. And keep in mind this applies to all creatures, “from the greatest even to the least.” From superclusters, and galaxies down to quarks and leptons. God is providentially upholding the universe at several levels. He’s not merely keeping a machine running, with it’s atoms, and physical laws. He didn’t create a free space for things to play out at random. He acts at the levels planets, as well as at the level of atoms. He acts at the levels of nations, tribes, clans, and individuals. He acts at the levels of angels, and of men.

1. What is meant by “uphold?”

Hebrews 1:3 says the Christ “he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”

The Greek behind the word “uphold” we have (pherō) meaning to bring; carry; or bear.

That is, the universe wouldn’t continue without him.

In John 5:17, Jesus says, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” The context here is that the Jews were persecuting Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus replied by referring to Providence. When God rested from the work of creation, he continued to sustain the universe. The Sabbath isn’t broken by God’s sustaining work.

Colossians 1:17 says, “And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

In Acts 17, Paul quotes the pagan poet Epimenedes of Crete.

Romans 11:36

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever. Amen.

2. What is meant by “direct?”

Job 2:10: “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.”

Isaiah 45:7: “I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these things.”

Lamentations 3:38: “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?”

Proverbs 16:9: A man’s heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.

Proverbs 21:1: The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

Is 5:26.

²⁶ [The Lord] will raise a signal for nations far away,
and whistle for them from the ends of the earth;
and behold, quickly, speedily they come!

Is 46:9–11.

... I am God, and there is none like me,
¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, 'My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,'

That counsel, and purpose is the decree.

¹¹ calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man of my counsel from a far country.
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it.

That's the Lord's directing providence.

(a) See look God deals with Assyria in Isaiah 8-10

⁵ Again the LORD spoke to me further, saying, ⁶ "Inas-much as these people have rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah And rejoice in Rezin and the son of Remaliah; ⁷ "Now therefore, behold, the Lord is about to bring on them the strong and abundant waters of the Euphrates, Even the king of Assyria and all his glory; And it will rise up over all its channels and go over all its banks. ⁸ "Then it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass through, It will reach even to the neck; And the spread of its wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.

In other words, "you like Assyria so much? I'll give you your fill of Assyria." The point is that the Lord, is sending one nation to chastise another. It says "*the Lord* is about to bring on them

the strong and abundant waters of the Euphrates.” They’ll come against Judah and Israel according to *his* purpose and intention. Now jump down to chapter 10, and verse 5:

⁵ Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger;
the staff in their hands is my fury!
⁶ Against a godless nation I send him,
and against the people of my wrath I command him,
to take spoil and seize plunder,
and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

The Lord is still claiming Assyria as his own, to use for his purposes. But here’s what Assyria thinks of itself:

⁷ But he does not so intend,
and his heart does not so think;
but it is in his heart to destroy,
and to cut off nations not a few;

Assyria speaks big words about itself but,

¹² When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes. ¹³ For he says: ‘By the strength of my hand I have done it,
and by my wisdom, for I have understanding;
I remove the boundaries of peoples,
and plunder their treasures;
like a bull I bring down those who sit on thrones.’

And,

¹⁵ Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it,
or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it?
As if a rod should wield him who lifts it,
or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood!
¹⁶ Therefore the Lord God of hosts
will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors,
and under his glory a burning will be kindled,
like the burning of fire.

This episode really brings out those praiseworthy attributes of God: His wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy—especially justice. The Lord judges his people using another peo-

ple, but that other people isn't excused for their attitudes or intentions. Nothing will be missed in God's perfect justice.

3. What is meant by "dispose?"

God "disposes" in the sense of "arranging," or "organizing."

After speaking of several creatures in Psalm 104, David says,

²⁷ These all look to you,
to give them their food in due season.
²⁸ When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.

Here we see him arranging circumstances so that his creation is sustained, not just in its physical existing; God arranges to have our needs met.

Proverbs 16:33 says,

³³ The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the Lord.

The KJV actually uses our word, saying "but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD." Incidentally, this is why gambling would fall in the category of "tempting the Lord." Dice rolls are not random¹.

4. What is meant by "govern?"

To restrain, or limit.

Under this category of governing, we see that God restrains people from the evil they *would* do.

David prays in Psalm 19:13, "Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins;"

Jude's doxology is "to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless. . ."

But he's also at work in unbelievers.

Romans 1:22-24:

¹ Anyone who knows anything about the cryptography branch of computer science will know that randomness is a bit of a scam. The best we can manage is unpredictability. But every decision is from the Lord.

²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts

25-26:

...they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.

28:

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

If God gave them up, then he was holding them back.

Job 38:8

who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb,
⁹ when I made clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
¹⁰ and prescribed limits for it
and set bars and doors,
¹¹ and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stayed'?

The wild sea is sometimes metaphorical of nations in the bible, and in Psalm 2, the kings of the earth explicitly mention God's governing restraints—his bonds and cords:

² The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying,
³ "Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us."

Note how Providence is sweet freedom to those who trust the Lord, but is blind unbelief imprisons even kings in fetters.

*Blind unbelief is sure to err
and scan His work in vain.
God is his own interpreter,
and he will make it plain.*

1.2 The Care of the Church

1.2.1 ¶ 2 [the nature of second causes]

Before closing, we should touch on the second paragraph, because now it sounds like we're a bunch of automatons, doesn't it? Can we really have any moral agency? Or, "Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?" But, if you really think about it, those four verbs we went over, "uphold, direct, dispose, and govern," don't really amount to any kind of direct mechanical, or causal control. The second paragraph begins to make the clarification:

Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly;(4) so that there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without His providence;(5) yet by the same providence He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.(6)

1. Ac 2:23.
2. Pr 16:33.
3. Ge 8:22.

Let's zoom in on those last three words.

1. What sorts of things occur necessarily?

This means things which happen like a row of falling dominoes. Levers pulled, gears turned, *etc.* These are the laws of the physical Universe, of logic, and arithmetic. This is easy to understand, but some make do the mistake of thinking that God's providential activity is direct, and immediate. This is the exactly the fatalist view this paragraph denies.

2. What sorts of things occur contingently?

Someone might start to think, "if everything is so predetermined in the decree, and carried out providentially, then why do we pray?" First, we're told to; and the older I get, the more I realize that "because I

said so” is a perfectly complete, and adequate answer. The younger a kid can pick up on that, they better off he’ll be. But, beyond that, prayer is actually a second cause.

2 Chronicles 7:14 says,

¹⁴ if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

God makes an if/then relationship between prayer, and certain spiritual, and physical circumstances. What should his people expect if they don’t “humble themselves, and pray?”

James says we need to pray rightly. In chapter 1, verse 5 he says,

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Can you think of another example of contingency? Let’s look at Paul’s shipwreck for a minute.

Acts 27:

²¹ Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. ²² Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ ²⁵ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ But we must run aground on some island.”

So we have a guarantee that everyone will be saved. But this isn't like the case of the boys in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. God is working according to ordinary second causes. Paul shows not just that they'll be saved, but that there's a *how* they are to be saved.

²⁹ And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. ³⁰ And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, ³¹ Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." ³² Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go.

The angels guarantee wasn't one of necessity, but of contingency, even though they could have certainty of the outcome.

3. What sorts of things occur freely?

If we think history is playing out flawlessly according to the decree because God is controlling our every move like a bunch of marionettes, we've got it wrong. The truth is we're absolutely predictable.

This is hinted at in John 6.

²⁴ But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, ²⁵ And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

A. A. Hodge's commentary on the Westminster is helpful. He explains "that the manner in which God controls his creatures and their actions, and effects his purposes through them, is in every case perfectly consistent with the nature of the creature and of his mode of action" He makes three points:

- (a) Our natures, peculiar characters were part of the original design, therefore the Lord wouldn't be self-consistent if he forced us to act contrary to our own natures. Our own natures are part of the design.
- (b) "The same fact is proved by our uniform experience and observation. We are conscious of acting freely according to the law of our constitution as free agents. Even in the writings of the prophets

and apostles, who wrote under the control of a specific divine influence, rendering even their selection of words infallibly accurate, we can plainly see that the spontaneous exercise of the faculties of the writers was neither superseded nor coerced. Every agent in the material and brute creations, also, is observed constantly to act, under all changing conditions, according to the uniform law of its nature.”

- (c) God doesn’t work out his purposes in the way we work out ours. We can grasp the laws of nature, and the properties of things enough to clumsily make them serve our purposes. But God’s grasp of these things is total–comprehensive. And everything was especially designed for his purpose. “Even the human soul, in the exercise of free agency, acts according to a law of its own, excluding necessity, but not excluding certainty. The springs of free action are within the soul itself. And yet, as these are modified without interfering with the liberty of the agent by the influence of other men, they certainly cannot lie beyond the control of the Infinite Intelligence who created the soul itself, and has determined all the conditions under which its character has been formed and its activities exercised.”

Ahab’s death is a great example of this sort of a free second cause. In II Kings 22, a prophet of God tells Ahab he’s certain to die in battle that day. Thinking he’ll outsmart a prophecy of God, he goes to battle in disguise.

³⁴ But a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate. Therefore he said to the driver of his chariot, “Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded.” ³⁵ And the battle continued that day, and the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Syrians, until at evening he died.

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”

³⁵ “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever. Amen.

2 Chapter 5: Of Divine Providence II

2.1 Recap

2.1.1 ¶ 1 The summary statement of the doctrine

God the good creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all His creatures and things,(1) from the greatest even to the least,(2) by His most wise and holy providence, to the end for which they were created, according unto His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will; to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.(3)

I think it's worth repeating how Sam Waldron describes the connection between the doctrines of the decree, and of providence:

The decree is the blueprint or plan. Providence carries out the blueprint or plan by guiding the actual course of history. The decree takes place in eternity. Providence takes place in history².

James Renihan says it like this:

He executes His decrees in the works of creation and providence. What we see around us is simply the historical expression of the eternal decree of God³.

We looked at those four verbs (doth uphold, direct, dispose) and saw that none of them amount to direct control, coercion, or overriding of anyone's nature. We're not automatons, and God isn't a puppeteer.

A couple of themes I tried to emphasize are:

1. Theology should lead to praise.
 - Theology usually leads to one of two things, praise, or puffing up.

²Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1989), 105.

³Renihan, *Baptist Symbolics Volume 2*, location 3,236.

2. Because there's purpose and intent behind the biggest and smallest things, we ought to see even the tedious and mundane as meaningful. Matthew 10:42 says,

And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.

And I Corinthians 10:31 says,

Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.

Eating and drinking are pretty mundane things.

We talked about how the alternative to believing in the doctrine of divine providence is believing in man-centered materialism. This kind of materialism is the uncritically assumed default position of our culture. Because of this, it can be very much in our bones. “Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting⁴.”

2.1.2 ¶ 2 [the nature of second causes]

Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly;(4) so that there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without His providence;(5) yet by the same providence He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.(6)

We talked about how the certainty of an event predestined by the decree does not imply that it is carried out by the Lord acting *directly*. Certainty doesn't imply immediacy. He knows us, we're predictable—he doesn't need to force us to do anything. Rather the Lord works most often by second causes in history.

We talked about those words at the end (necessarily, freely, contingently). We saw how the Lord can bring anything to pass without anyone acting contrary to their nature.

Indeed, why would God even design a world where every event is effected by means if he were always acting contrary to his own design. Jeremiah Burroughs said,

⁴Matthew 17:21

We indeed look at things by pieces, we look at one particular and do not consider the reference that one thing hath to another; but God he looks at all things at once, and sees the reference that one thing hath to another⁵.

God made a world where everything is related to every other thing. There's an innumerable chain of events leading to this moment, and another innumerable chain leading away, in to the future.

2.2 The Care of the Church

2.2.1 ¶ 3 [God's works are in a variety of relationships to ordinary means]

God, in His ordinary⁶ providence maketh use of means,(7) yet is free to work without,(8) above,(9) and against them(10) at His pleasure.

The Lord can go with the grain or against the grain. The Lord usually goes with the grain. Ordinary, doesn't mean usual, or normal, but, rather, according to a rule. It's related to the word 'ordain.'

- 7 - Ac 27:31,44; Isa 55:10-11. [ordinary use of means]
 - Acts 27:31,44: Paul's shipwreck
 - Isaiah 55:10-11: Rain and snow water the earth, making plants fruitful, and feeding everyone. The Word works the same way, never returning void; always fruitful.
 - ¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
- 8 - Hos 1:7: Although Israel will be swept away, the Lord will save Judah without sword, battle or horsemen. [without]

⁵Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (London: Peter Cole, 1648), 96, cited in James M. Renihan, *To the Judicious and Impartial Reader: Baptist Symbolics Volume 2* (Founders Press, 2022), e-book, location 3,250.

⁶Renihan also points out that the word 'ordinary' is related to the word ordain.

⁷ But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God. I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen.

- 9 - Ro 4:19-21: Abraham and Sara perhaps no longer have functional equipment, yet they would reproduce “naturally.” [above]

¹⁹ [Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. ²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

- 10 - Da 3:27: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah didn’t burn. [against]

James Renihan says,

The clause intends more than simply speaking about the universe. It is the doorway to a consideration, not only of the natural processes through which the Lord upholds, directs, disposes, and governs His creation, but also of the means of grace He uses to grant grace to His people⁷.

To show this, let’s look at how often the idea comes up in the confession itself:

1. Chapter 1 (Of the Scripture), paragraph 7 says that both the learned, and the unlearned, through a “due use of ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of [the Scriptures].”
2. Chapter 14 (Of Saving Faith), paragraph 1 says, that “The grace of faith [...is increased and strengthened...] by the administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, prayer, and other means appointed of God [...].”
3. Chapter 17 (Of the Perseverance of the Saints), Paragraph 3 says that saints can, through the “neglect of means of their preservation,” may fall into grievous sins.

⁷Renihan, Baptist Symbolics Volume 2, location 3,340.

4. Chapter 18 (Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation), Paragraph 3 says that, “it is the duty of every one to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure” because “in the right use of means,” and “without extraordinary revelation” the Spirit enables us to have infallible assurance.
5. The idea is also present in chapter 22 (Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day), and chapters 28-30, which pertain to baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

We ought to make use of the means God has provided for our growth, and sanctification. We can’t skip prayer, and time in the word, and hope the Lord will make us holy without means. The Lord never promised such a thing. Solomon says,

³⁰ I passed by the field of a sluggard,
by the vineyard of a man lacking sense,
³¹ and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns;
the ground was covered with nettles,
and its stone wall was broken down.
³² Then I saw and considered it;
I looked and received instruction.
³³ A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
³⁴ and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want like an armed man.

The sluggard has no reason to expect an orderly house, or an righteous soul without work. These proverbs may sound a bit earthy, but they apply in multiple domains—including spiritual.

- “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.” (Proverbs 10:4)
- “The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labor.” (Proverbs 12:24)
- “Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth.” (Proverbs 12:27)
- “The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.” (Proverbs 13:4)

- Wisdom personified says, “I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me.” (Proverbs 8:17)

So we make use of ordinary means. We are not to neglect ordinary means and hope for miracles.

2.2.2 ¶ 4 [even sin is managed and governed without God’s participation, or approval]

The Almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in His providence, that His determinate counsel extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sinful actions both of angels and men;(11) and that not by a bare permission, which also He most wisely and powerfully boundeth, and otherwise ordereth and governeth,(12) in a manifold dispensation to His most holy ends;(13) yet so, as the sinfulness of their acts proceedeth only from the creatures, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.(14)

The course of history was never an open question to be determined by the autonomous liberty of man. Not even at the very beginning, before the fall. But it goes on to say that God isn’t merely permitting sinful actions, but putting a boundary around it, governing it, ordering it—he bends it to serve his own righteous purposes.

- 11 - Ro 11:32-34; 2Sa 24:1; 1Ch 21:1.
 - Ro 11:32-34: “God hath concluded them all [Jews] in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.”

³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. ³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”
 - 2Sa 24:1/1Ch 21:1: “the Lord [...] moved David”/“Satan [...] provoked David.”

Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go, number Israel and Judah.”

Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.

- 12 - 2Ki 19:28; Ps 76:10.

- 2 Ki 19:28: The Lord will drag Israel in slavery by another nation.
Isaiah prophesys:

Because you have raged against me
and your complacency has come into my ears,
I will put my hook in your nose
and my bit in your mouth,
and I will turn you back on the way
by which you came.

- Ps 76:10 Man's wrath bent toward God's purposes.

Surely the wrath of man shall praise you;
the remnant of wrath you will put on like a belt.

- 13 - Ge 1:20; Isa 10:6-7,12.

- Ge 1:20: ?? Is it that "the waters bring forth," rather than the Lord directly?

And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens."

- Isa 10:6-7,12: The Lord sends the Assyrians against Israel.

- 14 - Ps 50:21; 1Jn 2:16.

- Ps 50:21: When the Lord is silent people begin to think the Lord approves.

These things you have done, and I have been silent;
you thought that I was one like yourself.
But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.

- 1Jn 2:16: Some things in the world are not "of the Father."

For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.

2.2.3 ¶ 7 [not exactly common grace and special grace]

Sometimes I like to do these paragraphs a little out of sequence, so I'd like to use paragraph 7 as a preface to paragraphs 5 and 6.

As the providence of God doth in general reach to all creatures,
so after a more special manner it taketh care of His church, and
disposeth of all things to the good thereof.(23)

1. 1Ti 4:10; Am 9:8-9; Isa 43:3-5.

- 1Ti 4:10: "For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe."
- Am 9:8-9: The Lord will raze the kingdom to the ground, except the house of Jacob.

Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom,
and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground,
except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,
declares the Lord.

- Isa 43:3-5: The Lord's people are precious to him. This is personal.

For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.

Ephesians 5:25 says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." God's love for us isn't generic—he has chosen us in particular. Although he loves his creation, there's a special love for his elect. This is like the idea of common grace *vs.* special grace. There's a commonness, and specialness to God's acts of providence as well.

2.2.4 ¶ 6 ["God's ways with His enemies."]

As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous judge, for former sin doth blind and harden;(17) from them He not only withholdeth His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understanding, and wrought upon their

hearts;(18) but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had,(19) and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin;(20) and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan,(21) whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, under those means which God useth for the softening of others.(22)

I said earlier that theology leads to praise. Theology can also lead to puffing up. The same information can lead to two different results. The problem isn't in the theology. Our confession here puts it in the nature of the subject. Renihan says,

Humanity may be divided into two categories: the people of God—His elect—and the rest. Paragraph six is speaking of the non-elect, using ethical terms: they are wicked. They live in and for sin. They are not simply sinful in Adam, though that is true; they are also pursuers and practitioners of sin. It is what their lives are about. And they are ungodly, without any desire to know God. They follow idols, whether carved from wood or stone, false gods imagined in their minds, or material goods. Ungodly is an apt description.

There, but for the grace of God, go I.

- 17 - Ro 1:24-26, 28; 11:7-8.

- Ro 1:24-26, 28 God leaves the wicked to their inclinations
- Ro 11:7-8: Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. But the elect obtained it.

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking.

The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, ⁸

as it is written,

“God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day.”

- 18 - Dt 29:4.

- Though Israel saw great wonders, the Lord hadn't “given them a heart to understand.” Without God's work, no miracle, no matter how amazing, or how undeniable will lead us to trust him.

Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: “You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land,³ the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders.⁴ But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.

- 19 - Mt 13:12.

- As well as giving a heart to understand, the Lord my take away what light one does have.

For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

- 20 - Dt 2:30; 2Kn 8:12-13.

- Dt 2:30: God hardened King Sihon’s heart in order to give Heshbon into Israel’s hand. Sihon’s corruption made Israel’s passing an occasion for sin.

Sihon the king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him, for the Lord your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might give him into your hand, as he is this day.

- 2Kn 8:12-13 Hazael will become the next king of Syria. Elisha knew how he would use that power. Just so, the Lord knows what each of us would do if we had all the freedom and resources we want.

the man of God wept.¹² And Hazael said, “Why does my lord weep?” He answered, “Because I know the evil that you will do to the people of Israel. You will set on fire their fortresses, and you will kill their young men with the sword and dash in pieces their little ones and rip open their pregnant women.”¹³ And Hazael said, “What is your servant, who is but a dog, that he should do this great thing?” Elisha answered, “The Lord has shown me that you are to be king over Syria.”

- 21 - Ps 81:11-12; 2Th 2:10-12.

- Ps 81:11-12: Israel is given over to their stubborn hearts because they wouldn't listen.
- 2Th 2:10-12 God will send strong delusion to those who refuse to love the truth.
- 22 - Ex 8:15,32; Isa 6:9-10; 1Pe 2:7-8.
 - Ex 8:15, 32: God used means that would probably have softened others up. But it hardened Pharaoh.
 - Isa 6:9-10: Isaiah is sent to preach, but rather than seeing and understanding, they become more and more dull.
 - 1Pe 2:7-8: Christ is a stumbling stone, and a rock of offense to the unbelieving, but he's the chief cornerstone of the church.

2.2.5 ¶ 5 [MHC: “Holy love mourning for God’s present with-drawings and the want of the benefit of solemn ordinances”]

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave for a season His own children to manifold temptations and the corruptions of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself; and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for other just and holy ends.(15) So that whatsoever befalls any of His elect is by His appointment, for His glory, and their good.(16)

- 15 - 2Ch 32:25-26, 31; 2Co 12:7-9.
 - 2Ch 32:25-26, 31 The Lord turned from Hezekiah 'til he humbled himself.
 - 2Co 12:7-9: Paul's thorn/“My grace is sufficient...”
- 16 - Ro 8:28 “All things work together...”
- [Psalm 42]: “My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where is thy God?”

The term “temptation” here should be thought of in it’s older sense. Not strictly being enticed into something—think of “testing and strengthening”—which may well include temptation to sin⁸.

Renihan says,

The word *leave* is significant. Since God is not the author of sin, nor the tempter (James 1.13-14), a proper explanation of this matter must reflect that fact. God permits His people to endure various trials. The way of the believer is at times difficult, and trials that come must be ascribed to God’s decree accomplished in providence. Since this is true, the question becomes, “How should a believer view the troubles of life?” In them all, God is always wise, righteous, and gracious to His elect⁹.

So here the confession gives us an open-ended list of subjects for meditation when in the midst of providential disturbances.

1. to chastise them for their former sins, or

Chastisement for sin isn’t always the Lord may leave us to ourselves.

For instance, John 9:1:

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. ² And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Sin isn’t always the reason for chastisement, but it might be.

Consider 2 Samuel 12:9, where the prophet Nathan says to David:

You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰ Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ ¹¹ Thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house.

⁸Renihan, Baptist Symbolics Volume 2, location 3,490.

⁹Renihan, Baptist Symbolics Volume 2, location 3,490.

The death of his son with Bathsheba, as well as strife in David's own household are providential chastisements.

Or 2 Chronicles 32:24:

²⁴ In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death, and he prayed to the Lord, and he answered him and gave him a sign. ²⁵ But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem. ²⁶ But Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the Lord did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah.

So, if we feel the Lord has left us to ourselves, and our conscience is ringing with something in particular, then we can safely say we're in this category. Or if we're experiencing the natural consequences of our sin, we are wise to take it as chastisement.

2. to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and

I think Job fits well into this category. Hard providences fell on him in the height of his faithfulness. He held his integrity when he lost his property, and his family. It wasn't until his friends applied their pressure that he began to justify himself before God. The whole incident revealed something in Job's heart and humbled him. He repented in dust and ashes.

Paul has another example in 2 Corinthians 12:7:

to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

3. to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself;

The prayer “give us this day our daily bread” implies much more than simply food for the belly¹⁰.

Day by day, and with each passing moment,
Strength I find to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father’s wise bestowment,
I’ve no cause for worry or for fear.
He, whose heart is kind beyond all measure,
Gives unto each day what He deems best,

In Psalm 42, David is brought to a real awareness of his dependence on God. He says,

¹ As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?

He says,

¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

Without God’s special care for his church, rather than righteously longing for the presence of God, we might turn to mediums for relief as King Saul did.

4. and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin,
and
5. for other just and holy ends.

2.2.6 “The Mystery of Providence” John Flavel

1. Practical implications

¹⁰Renihan, Baptist Symbolics Volume 2, location 3,506.

- (a) “If, as we have seen, God performs all things for you, God is to be owned by you in all that befalls you in this world, whether it is in a way of success and comfort, or of trouble and affliction.”
- (b) “If God performs all things for you, how great is His condescension to and care over His people!”
- (c) “If God performs all things for you, see how obliged you are to perform all duties and services for God.”
- (d) “Does God perform all things for His people? Do not distrust Him then when new or great difficulties arise.”
- (e) “Does God perform all things for you? Then seek God for all by prayer, and never undertake any design without Him.”
- (f) “If God performs all things for us, then it is our great interest and concern in all things to study to please Him, upon whom we depend for all things.”

2. Practical problems

3. The Advantages of Recording our Experiences of Providence