



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.3 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

God's Involvement in Every Earthly Activity

God is directly involved in the lives of every creature. God is involved in everything that happens. Nothing in this world takes place apart from God's will and His involvement. We can therefore call God the first or *primary cause* of all things. The prophet Amos pointed out to the Israelites that when calamity arrived in their towns and villages, this did not happen apart from God: **"If there is calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done it?"** (Amos 3:6). The apostle Paul pointed this out to the Athenians: **"He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move, and have our being"** (Acts 17:26-28). Even as God has made all creatures, so He continues to be involved in all their activities. He determines their time and place. He is not far from each one of them. This means that He is very close to them; He provides and cares for them, and He can direct their thoughts and actions if He chooses to do so. People even receive their strength to sin from Him, for their every movement is with God's power and preservation.

In the case of believers, God's influence extends even further. He not only gives believers the strength and ability to do what they do, but He also gives them the will and the desire to please Him by their actions. He is responsible for the good works that He works in them. Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi: **"It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure"** (Philippians 2:13).

God usually works through *secondary causes*, however. For example, God does not bring new life into the world directly, but through the secondary cause of giving creatures the ability and desire to reproduce. Thus, a father and mother work to bring an infant into the world; nevertheless, we can call their infant a gift from God. God is the primary cause. The parents are the secondary cause. Another example is food. Proverbs 12:11 says: **"He who tills his land will be satisfied with bread."** The secondary cause of the bread is the labor of the farmer, and yet at the same time the bread is a gift from God. God works through the sun to heat the earth. God works through the wind to dry the soil. Thus, the bread that a man eats is the result of a joint action by both God and the farmer and whoever else is involved in the production of the bread. God could produce bread by Himself without using means, as He did when He provided the Israelites with manna in the wilderness. But almost always God chooses to do His work of preservation through secondary causes.

God could have destroyed the Canaanite nations in an instant, but He chose to use the Israelites to wage war against them and defeat them gradually. David killed Goliath, but it was God who gave David the desire and the skills to kill him. Psalm 148:8 says: **"Fire and hail, snow and clouds, stormy wind, fulfilling His word."** God uses these "forces of nature" to fulfill His will and His word.

God can also protect His children from things that would normally hurt us. For example, He can protect us from fire so that the fire does not do what it usually does. God did this in the case of the three men who were thrown into the fiery furnace. The king and his counselors **"saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them"** (Daniel 3:27).

When we say that God even gives the sinner the strength to commit his sin, we must be careful to explain that this does not make God responsible for the sinning. God supplies the sinner with the strength and the skills of body and mind that the sinner uses to sin. But God does not do the sinning, and He is not responsible for it. God remains always holy and sinless, as the Scriptures clearly teach us. Towards the end of his life, Moses taught the Israelites a song that proclaims God to be perfect and ascribes their sinning to the people and not to God Himself, as though their sin were God's fault. **"He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He. They have corrupted themselves; they are not His children, because of their blemish: a perverse and crooked generation"** (Deuteronomy 32:4-5). Scripture always says that sin is the fault of the sinning person, not of God. John tells us: **"You know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin"** (1 John 3:5).

Since the ways of God are beyond our human comprehension, some have been misled by their human reason to deny or twist God's teachings about His providence. For example, Atheists deny the very existence of God and believe that what happens in the world is not controlled by any superior power. They believe that the world is without design, plan, or purpose. God calls atheists fools, because they suppress entirely the knowledge of God that comes from creation and from the inner voice of their conscience. There are others who do not consider themselves to be atheists, but they are practically atheists, because the idea of God does not influence their thinking. Basically, they are materialists; some even regard matter itself as eternal and having no maker or designer.

In Paul's day some of the Greek philosophers were Epicureans. The Epicureans deny any life after death, and they believed that the best thing to do was to make the most of this life by enjoying the various pleasures of life. In other words, the best course of action is to eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. It seems that this philosophy is very prevalent in our time also. This way of thinking is called *hedonism*.

Deists believe in a God who made things in the beginning, but they believe that God is now no longer involved in what He made, except through "the laws of nature". The early Americans Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine were deists.

There are others who believe that everything has been predetermined, so that human beings really have no responsibility for their actions. Islam, for example, is a fatalist religion. The ancient Greek philosophy of Stoicism also portrayed humans as helpless pawns controlled by fate. John Calvin himself taught the doctrine of double predestination: that God from eternity chose some to be saved and He chose others to be damned. This false doctrine is still taught by some Calvinists today, but it is not taught anywhere in God's Word. On the contrary, Christians are invited to believe that the Lord **"is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"** (2 Peter 3:9).

Questions

1. Why is God called the first or primary cause?
2. How do you understand the words: **"In Him we live and move and have our being"**?
3. In what special way does God work in believers?
4. What is meant by secondary causes? Give some examples.
5. Why were the three men not burned in the fiery furnace?
6. To what extent is God involved in the sinning of sinners?
7. Who is responsible for the sinning?
8. Why dare we never say that God is the cause of men's sin?
9. Define atheism, materialism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, fatalism, deism.
10. In what way is John Calvin's teaching on predestination false teaching?