



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.6 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

Permission, Prevention, Direction, and Limitation

God carries out His designs in various ways. God is never responsible for any evil, but sometimes He permits an evil to occur that He could have prevented. This does not mean that He does not care about the evil or that He is unable to prevent the evil. He may permit evil in various ways and for different purposes.

God may permit tragedies to happen in the lives of His children for various reasons. These are not actually evil, for the Bible says: **“The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul”** (Psalm 121:7). God may allow tragedies to happen as a means of chastisement or to teach us patience, perseverance, and trust to strengthen our faith.

At times God permits evil people to carry out the evil intentions of their hearts. These evil actions will often affect God's children, but God prevents any real evil to harm their souls. God promises that **“all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose”** (Romans 8:28).

When God permits unbelievers to carry out the evil in their hearts, it may be to an act of His judgment. He is punishing sinners by permitting the sin in their lives to run its natural course. In everything He does, God always is just and righteous. And He always has a holy hatred of sin. We read in Psalm 5:4: **“You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with you.”** The prophet Zechariah likewise says: **“Let none of you think evil in your heart against your neighbor; and do not love a false oath. For all these are things that I hate,” says the LORD** (Zechariah 8:17).

Psalm 81 clearly states that God's permitting a person to do evil is actually a judgment from God on their sin: **“My people would not heed My voice, and Israel would have none of Me. So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels”** (Psalm 81:11-12). Likewise, Solomon says: **“Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out My hand and no one regarded, because you despised all My counsel and would have none of My rebuke, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes”** (Proverbs 1:24-26). This shows us what a horrible thing it is to reject God's Word! The apostle Paul told his heathen audience in Lystra that God **“in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways”** (Acts 14:16). Being allowed to go their own way was God's punishment.

Romans 1 clearly states that God punishes heathen idolatry by permitting their evil to become **“uncleanness”** and **“vile passions”**: **“Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves...For this reason God gave them up to vile passions...God gave them over to a debased mind”** (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). In our New Testament era God has allowed the Antichrist to gain power for this same reason: **“because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie”** (2 Thessalonians 2:10-11). The rise of the Antichrist is a punishment from God.

God's permission of evil sometimes fools the wicked into thinking that God will never punish them for their evil. They do not realize that God's permission is already a form of punishment. Speaking for God, Asaph says to the wicked: **“These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought that I was**

altogether like you; but I will rebuke you, and set them in order before your eyes” (Psalm 50:21). The full punishment will come in due time. God delays final judgment because He is **“not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”** (2 Peter 3:9).

God also chooses at times to prevent the evil from happening. When the wicked men of Sodom wanted to take Lot and beat him, God’s two angels **“struck the men who were at the doorway of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they became weary trying to find the door”** (Genesis 19:11). God prevented the pursuing Egyptians from harming the Israelites as they fled from Egypt: **“The LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore”** (Exodus 14:30). God prevented Balaam from cursing Israel, even though he would have liked to curse them in order to gain a large reward (Numbers 22:12).

God knows how to use man’s evil for the good of His believers. This was true in the case of Joseph in the Old Testament. It is also true in our case, for it is written that **“all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose”** (Romans 8:28). Even though this is far beyond our comprehension, God directs and controls all events in the entire world so that ultimately His people succeed (not necessarily in this life, but in the future life). And God directs and controls all events in the entire world so that the enemies of God people are frustrated and fail, like the rich man in Jesus’ parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus.

God was even able to use the devil’s hatred for Jesus, as well as the hatred of the Jewish leaders, in His plan for the salvation of the world. The early Christians understood this, for they prayed: **“Truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done”** (Acts 4:27-28). Jesus’ enemies meant to harm Him, but God used their hatred and their wicked purpose for the salvation of the world according to His eternal purpose. Satan put Jesus to death, but Jesus used the scheme of Satan to defeat him and to take away his power to accuse sinners.

Remember that God and Satan are not opposite equals. The devil wishes to be equal to God, but God is more powerful. God always triumphs in the end. We see this in the book of Revelation. The fact is that by His superior power, God limits the damage that Satan can do. We see this especially in the Old Testament book of Job: the devil is permitted to have great power over Job, but only within the limits that God has set. First God said to Satan: **“Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person”** (Job 1:12). Satan’s power was confined to this limitation set by God. A little later God allowed Satan a bit more leeway. He said to Satan: **“Behold, he is in your hand, but spare his life”** (Job 2:6). While the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, he is chained and under the control of God.

David faced many enemies in his life. At times it seemed there was no hope at all for him. But David praised God for limiting the power of his enemies: **“Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers”** (Psalm 124:4-5). And often God arranges things so that the evil purposes of the wicked backfire: **“He made a pit and dug it out, and has fallen into the ditch which he made. His trouble shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down on his own crown”** (Psalm 7:15-16).

Questions

1. How does God feel about all sin?
2. Why does God sometimes permit sinners to keep on sinning?
3. How does God respond to those who persist in rejecting His Word?
4. How did God punish the idolatry of the heathen world?
5. Why did God permit the Antichrist to arise among His believers?
6. What do unbelievers sometimes think when God seems to delay judgment?
7. How did God prevent the wicked from harming Lot?
8. What assurance do we have regarding everything that happens in this world?
9. How did God turn the hatred of Jesus' enemies into good for His people?
10. What limitations did God put on Satan's dealings with Job?
11. Why is it comforting to know that our Lord is in control?