



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Chapter 5

The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.1 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

The Activity of God after Creation

The book of Genesis tells us that after God created the world in six days, **“He rested from all His work which He had done”** (Genesis 2:3). This means that God rested from His work of creation and did no more creating. But God did not stop working. God is not like a watchmaker who expects the watch to keep on working on its own after he has finished with it. No, God is involved with all of His creation at all times. This is what is meant by the doctrine of providence or preservation. After creating the world and everything in it, God has continued to maintain the world and all its creatures, especially His most important creation: human beings. There would be no purpose in praying to God if we did not believe that He is in charge of His creation.

The word “providence” is related to the word “provide”, which is used many times in the Scriptures. When King Saul disobeyed God’s commands and made himself unfit to be king of God’s people, God said to the prophet Samuel: **“I am sending you to Jesse the Bethlehemite. For I have provided Myself a king among his sons”** (1 Samuel 16:1). As human beings we make provision for the future; we are concerned about maintaining the things we have. In the same way God is concerned about everything He has, which is everything that exists, including you.

Here on earth it is vitally important that we take care of the things God has given us, particularly the people He has put in our care, like the members of our own families. Paul said to Timothy: **“If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel”** (1 Timothy 5:8). God does not tell us to do something He does not do Himself. He provides for His own, and He does it in the best possible way. This does not mean we always understand what He is doing and why He is doing it. But all of creation belongs to God, and for this reason He provides for it. David prays: **“O LORD, You preserve man and beast”** (Psalm 36:6).

Providence includes the idea that God determines to do a certain thing and then carries out His intention. It was God’s intention in the days of the prophet Isaiah to punish the Babylonians at a future time. Therefore, Isaiah says: **“The LORD of hosts has sworn, saying, ‘Surely, as I have thought, so it shall come to pass, and as I have purposed, so it shall stand... For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it?’”** (Isaiah 14:24-27). One of the Lord’s plans is to bring this world, which He created, to an end. As Paul said to the Athenians: **“He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness”** (Acts 17:31). God will surely carry out His intentions. That day will come.

All three Persons of God are involved in the work of preservation. Psalm 104 is a psalm that praises the LORD for His creation and preservation. Here are only a few choice verses. **“O LORD, how manifold are Your works! ... These all (living things both small and great) wait for You, that You may give them their food in due season. What You give them they gather in; You open Your hand, they are filled with good. You hide Your face, they are troubled; You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the earth”** (Psalm 104:24-30). Notice that God’s Spirit is also involved in the work of preservation.

Jesus ascribed the work of preservation primarily to His Father, saying to His disciples: **“Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them”** (Matthew 6:26). And Jesus taught: **“Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will”** (Matthew 10:29).

It is clear that Jesus, the Son of God, is also involved in the daily work of preservation. When Jesus was accused of working on the Sabbath, He said to His accusers: **“My Father has been working unto now, and I have been working”** (John 5:17). When he wrote to the Colossians, Paul said this about Jesus: **“He is before all things, and in Him all things consist”** (Colossians 1:17). This means that without Jesus’ work of preservation, all of God’s creation would simply disintegrate. In Jesus all things hold together. We learn this also from Hebrews 1:3, which tells us that Jesus is **“upholding all things by the word of His power.”**

There are three levels of God’s provision for His creatures. First, it is clear that God provides for all His creatures. Second, it is clear that He cares for all human beings as His most important creation. Finally, God cares in a special way for His own dear children who put their trust in Him.

Job testified that **“the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind”** is in the LORD’s hand (Job 12:10). David added: **“The LORD is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works”** (Psalm 145:9). **“He gives to the beast its food, and to the young ravens that cry”** (Psalm 147:9). God even cares for all the inanimate things that He created also, such as sun, moon, and stars. God preserves the entire universe. David speaks of these things when he says, **“Let them praise the name of the LORD, for He commanded and they were created. He also established them forever and ever; He made a decree which shall not pass away”** (Psalm 148:5-6).

It is especially important to remember how God cares for and preserves all of His creation in our day, when so many people express fear concerning such things as climate change and disease—things that in their opinion threaten the future of our planet. We need to remember God’s clear promise that He made to Noah and his family, especially when we see a rainbow in the sky: **“While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease”** (Genesis 8:22). Yes, the world will come to an end, but until that time, we should expect the seasons to follow the same pattern from year to year. God has promised it, and He is in control.

God is particularly concerned about preserving the crown of His creation, that is, the human race. As far as earthly blessings are concerned, God makes no distinction between those who love Him and those who do not. As Jesus said: **“Your Father in heaven... makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust”** (Matthew 5:45). In fact, often the ungodly receive more earthly blessings than God’s own children. Asaph confessed: **“I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked... They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men”** (Psalm 73:3-5).

Because God has created each one of us, He also preserves each one of us. Job acknowledged this when he said: **“Your hands have made me and fashioned me, an intricate unity... Did You not pour me out like milk, and curdle me like cheese, clothe me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews? You have granted me life and favor, and Your care has preserved my spirit”** (Job 10:8-12). As part of God’s preservation of human beings, He has also determined the details of our lives, such as where we live and how long we live. Job said: **“Since his days are determined, the number of his months is with You; You have appointed his limits, so that he cannot pass”** (Job 14:5).

We, who are children of God by faith in Christ Jesus, have many assurances in God’s Word that God, our Father, is watching over us, preserving, protecting, and providing for us each and every day even to the end of our earthly lives. That is why Peter says you can rest easy, **“casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you”** (1 Peter 5:7). Listen to these reassuring words from the psalms, and feel safe at all times:

- **“Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine”** (Psalm 33:18-19).
- **“I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread”** (Psalm 37:25).

- “He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge... No evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling. ... I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him” (Psalm 91:4, 10, 15).
- “The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand... The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore” (Psalm 121:5, 8).
- “The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth... The LORD preserves all who love Him” (Psalm 145:18, 20).

Questions

1. What did God stop doing after six days? What does He continue to do?
2. What is our God-given duty with respect to our own families?
3. How are each of the Persons of God active in the work of preservation?
4. How can the birds of the air teach us an important lesson?
5. What did Jesus mean when He said: “**I have been working**”?
6. What does the Bible say about God’s care of all His creatures?
7. Why do we not have to fear climate change and other similar events in nature?
8. What was Asaph’s complaint against God?
9. On whom does God send His rain and sunshine?
10. What promises about preservation has God given to His believers on earth?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.2 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

How God Keeps and Maintains His Creatures

In the beginning God created all things. God created many things in such a way that their existence would continue through propagation. But this propagation had certain limits. We read in Genesis 1:11: **“Then God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb that yields seed, and the fruit tree that yields fruit according to its kind, whose seed is in itself, on the earth.’”** The same expression is used with reference to the birds, the sea creatures, and the beasts and creeping things of the earth. Reproduction is limited to **“its kind.”** This makes it clear that from the beginning God did not intend for one kind to change into another kind, nor did He make this change possible. Change is possible within the created kinds, but it not possible for one created kind to change into to another. Therefore, God keeps and maintains His creatures in their original kinds. Of course, God has allowed some of the kinds He created to die out, such as the dinosaurs.

Psalms 104 states very clearly that God continues to be involved with all His. After listing the various creatures that God made in the beginning, the psalmist says: **“These all wait for You, that You give them their food in due season. What You give them they gather in; You open Your hand, they are filled with good. You hide Your face, they are troubled; You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the earth”** (Psalm 104:27-30). None of God’s creatures could continue to exist for even a moment without God’s preservation. He keeps them all alive and functioning according to their purpose. This includes oceans, mountains, the sun, moon, stars, and the entire universe. God holds all of this together. The Levites in Nehemiah’s time praised the Lord in these words: **“You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all”** (Nehemiah 9:6).

Jesus reminds us that His Heavenly Father feeds the birds of the air and clothes the grass of the field (Matthew 6:26-27). Jesus added that if God feeds the birds and clothes the grass, He most certainly also preserves and maintains His foremost creatures, human beings. The apostle Paul spoke this truth to the philosophers of Athens: **“He gives to all life, breath, and all things... In Him we live and move and have our being”** (Acts 17:25, 28). These words apply not only to believers, but to all individuals. Our very existence – our life – depends on God. Our every action is possible only because our God gives us the ability to move and act. This is true of all creatures.

Human beings, including believers, tend to credit their accomplishments to themselves or to others, rather than to God. The Israelites had to be reminded over and over again that their victories over their enemies were God’s victories. They could have accomplished nothing without God. Even their enemies won their victories through the power of God working in them. Yes, God often uses His enemies to accomplish His purposes. In the days of Joshua, the Israelites acknowledged that it was God who was at work in their lives. They said: **“The LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we passed”** (Joshua 24:17).

Some say that God cannot possibly be interested in the details of every creature, but God tells us otherwise. Jesus said: **“Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the**

ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:29-30). Those who are neglected by others are not neglected by God. **"The LORD watches over the strangers; He relieves the fatherless and widow"** (Psalm 146:9). The believer Asaph admitted: **"Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand"** (Psalm 73:23). Even though we may sometimes feel abandoned, that is not true: **"Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine"** (Psalm 33:18-19).

To maintain His creatures each day, God almost always uses the laws and systems that He created in the beginning. How does He feed His creatures? On the sixth day God said: **"See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth. In which there is life, I have given every green herb for food"** (Genesis 1:30). After the flood God specifically added to man's diet: **"Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you"** (Genesis 9:3). At the same time God promised: **"While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease"** (Genesis 8:22).

God ordinarily carries out His work of preservation according to natural laws that He has created from the beginning and according to the usual laws of cause and effect. God preserved the heathen people of Lystra in this way, as Paul told them: **"He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness"** (Acts 14:17). God **"sends the springs... He waters the hills... He causes the grass to grow and vegetation for the service of man"** and so on (Psalm 104:10-14). Job understood the laws of nature, for he said: **"He made a law for the rain, and a path for the thunderbolt"** (Job 28:26).

There are false teachers today who teach their followers to refuse to use some of the things God has created to preserve their lives. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses refuse blood transfusions, even when such transfusions could save their lives. The followers of Christian Science reject the use of most medicines because they argue that God cures the sick without medicine. In fact, they claim that sickness does not exist at all except in the mind.

God normally gives us food and clothing and the things we need through our own work. We work to earn money to buy things, or we work the land to grow the food we need, etc. God may keep us alive by leading us to put aside money during the good times in order to save for the bad times that may come. God is still doing the providing, but He is doing it by giving us the wisdom to save up for bad times, as Joseph saved up food from the seven good years in Egypt in preparation for the seven years of famine that were to follow.

If we refuse to use what God has given us to keep ourselves alive, we are tempting God. It is like saying to God: "I know that You have all power. Therefore, I will jump off this cliff and see whether You will keep me alive." This was what the devil told Jesus to do: **"If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you'"** (Matthew 4:6). Jesus' response is a warning for us: **"It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the LORD your God'"** (Matthew 4:7).

Questions

1. How did God provide for the preservation of the plants and animals He created?
2. What is meant by the phrase found in Genesis: **“according to its kind”**?
3. What happens when God withdraws Himself from His creatures?
4. What does it mean to live and move and have our being in God?
5. Why is it wrong for us to praise ourselves for our accomplishments?
6. How do we know that God is concerned about the very least of His creatures?
7. In what way does God usually feed His creatures?
8. Why would it be wrong for us to quit working and expect God to feed us?
9. In what way do Jehovah’s Witnesses and Christian Scientists tempt God?
10. What are some of the ways in which we might tempt God today?
11. What would you say to someone who refused to take medicine that could help him?
12. In what ways are some people poor by their own fault?
13. When would it be wrong for us to save up a large sum of money for possible future needs?



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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?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.4 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

God's Control and Direction of All Events and Human Actions

God does indeed control and direct all events and human actions. After they crossed the Red Sea in their escape from the land of Egypt, Moses and the children of Israel acknowledged that God is the Ruler and Governor of the world. They sang: **"The LORD shall reign forever and ever"** (Exodus 15:18). David acknowledged this as well: **"The LORD sits as King forever"** (Psalm 29:10), and also when he praised the Lord: **"Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and Your dominion endures throughout all generations"** (Psalm 145:13). After God gave Daniel the content and meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Daniel **"blessed the God of heaven"** and said: **"Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are His. And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and secret things; He knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with Him"** (Daniel 2:19-22).

God's government extends beyond His chosen people. Even though the Old Testament talks mostly about the history of the Israelites, God told them more than once that He was not a local god, but the absolute Ruler of all lands and all times. Moses said to them: **"Know this day, and consider it in your heart, that the LORD Himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other"** (Deuteronomy 4:39). The Psalms say the same thing: **"The LORD Most High is awesome; He is a great King over all the earth"** (Psalm 47:2) **"Whatever the LORD pleases He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all the deep places"** (Psalm 135:6). Even mighty King Nebuchadnezzar had to acknowledge God's rule after God humbled him by inflicting on him a period of insanity: **"He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'"** (Daniel 4:35). The apostle Paul was not ashamed to declare this truth to the proud Athenians: **"God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands"** (Acts 17:24).

The Lord's control extends to the tiniest of His creatures and to the minutest details of their activities. God said through Asaph: **"Every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains, and the wild beasts of the field are Mine"** (Psalm 50:10-11). According to Psalm 139, God even knows every thought that goes through the minds of every person, as well as every word they speak. Think of the vast universe with all the stars. God **"counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by name"** (Psalm 147:4). Jesus assured His disciples that not one sparrow falls to the ground without His Father's permission, and that even the hairs of their head are numbered (Matthew 10:29-31).

Man has vainly tried to control the forces of nature. We have little power against such events as hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, volcanoes, earthquakes, and tsunamis. But God is always in control. **"He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain; He brings the wind out of His treasures"** (Psalm 135:7). Jesus told His disciples that it is His Father in heaven that makes the sun rise and sends rain on the earth (Matthew 5:45).

There have been mighty nations on the earth, powerful kings, nearly invincible armies. Is God impressed with their strength? God gives His prophet Isaiah this response: **"Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust on the scales...All nations before Him are as**

nothing, and they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless” (Isaiah 40:15-17). God uses one nation to punish another. We read in the books of the prophets that God used the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians to accomplish His purposes. **“The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations”** (Psalm 33:10-11).

God also directs the destinies of individual human beings. After God answered Hannah’s prayer for a son, she confessed: **“The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and lifts up. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the beggar from the ash heap, to set them among princes and make them inherit the throne of glory”** (1 Samuel 2:6-8). In the midst of his afflictions, Job recognized that it was God who was afflicting him: **“You put my feet in the stocks”** (Job 13:27). David realized that God was involved with every detail of his existence: **“You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb... My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them”** (Psalm 139:13-16). **“A man’s heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps”** (Proverbs 16:9).

We know God wants all men to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4), so we also know that God’s direction of the world always has a beneficial purpose: to bring people to repentance and gain for them eternal salvation. Although His gracious purpose is thwarted by some, there are always others whom He brings to faith in His Son. It is especially for their benefit that things happen as they do: **“We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose”** (Romans 8:28). **“The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knows those who trust in Him”** (Nahum 1:7). Psalm 136 shows how everything God does is in accordance with His mercy. Whether He is creating the world or guiding His nation of Israel, we read: **“His mercy endures forever”** (Psalm 136, every verse). His intention for those who trust in Him is very simple. In the words of Asaph: **“You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory”** (Psalm 73:23-24).

Questions

1. How did Daniel express the thought that God rules over all things?
2. How did God explain to His people that He was not just a local god?
3. What was King Nebuchadnezzar forced to acknowledge concerning the true God?
4. To what extent is God involved in all of His creatures?
5. What must we say about all the forces of nature?
6. What are the nations of the earth like in relationship to God?
7. What are some examples of how God has brought down the proud and lifted up the lowly?
8. What did God know about David even before David was born?
9. What is God’s goal and purpose in ruling the world?
10. What does it mean that **“all things work together for good”**?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.5 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

The Relationship between God's Activity and Human Responsibility

Everyone has a certain amount of freedom of choice with respect to earthly things, whether they are a believer or an unbeliever. In the Old Testament many of the sacrifices were mandated, but there were also some offerings that were free will offerings. For example, Leviticus 22:18-19 says: **“You shall offer of your own free will a male without blemish”** in connection with certain vows and human decisions. In matters of marriage, the apostle Paul wrote that the father had a choice as to whether he should allow his virgin daughter to marry or insist that she should remain unmarried: **“Let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry. Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well”** (1 Corinthians 7:36-37). A human being has power over his own will in many matters; We are not programmed so that we must act a certain way and have no choice in these matters.

God controls the whole world and everything in it. But at the same time, people have free will. We cannot understand how both things can be true. They seem to contradict each other. But both are true: God has control over all things, and man is free to choose to do one thing or another, to sin in a certain way, or to refrain from sinning in that way. There is one thing, however, that man cannot do by nature. He cannot choose to believe in Jesus. This means that a person cannot, of their own free will, do anything that pleases God, because **“without faith it is impossible to please Him”** (Hebrews 11:6). This is why it is absolutely necessary to be born again before one can please God by one's thoughts and actions. A person must have a spiritual birth from above. Faith in Jesus is a gift from God; it is never a choice of man.

Jesus teaches that true freedom means that we no longer are slaves of sin and Satan. It means that we can make decisions that are in line with God's will. The Holy Spirit gives us this freedom through the truth of the Gospel, for He works through the means of grace: The Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Jesus said: **“If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”** (John 8:31-32). Jesus' Jewish listeners, however, thought they were already free. Jesus therefore said to them: **“Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin...If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed”** (John 8:34, 36). By nature, we were all **“slaves of sin”** (Romans 6:17). But through Christ and His Gospel we have **“been set free from sin”** and have **“become slaves of God”** and **“slaves of righteousness”** (Romans 6:18, 22).

Christians, however, have two opposing forces working within them: the new man and the old man — the mind (or spirit) and the flesh. The new man of faith has the freedom to trust in Christ for forgiveness and the freedom to serve God, but the new man is hindered by the flesh (the old man) which remains within him until death. Paul confessed this concerning himself: **“So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin”** (Romans 7:25).

How then should a Christian make decisions? Because we trust in Christ and want to please our loving Lord, we must eliminate all options that are sinful according to God's Word. This involves continual growth in understanding God's Word by reading and studying the Bible. We should also ask God for wisdom to make the best decision: **“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God”** (James 1:5). Since each one of us by faith in Christ has become a child of God, we will ask our Christian brothers and

sisters for their advice. And finally, we will make our decision, trying to determine which course of action will bring the greatest glory to God and the greatest good to others and to ourselves.

Unbelievers, on the other hand, cannot choose to believe in Jesus and therefore cannot choose to do anything except sin. That is why Jesus said: **“You must be born again”** (John 3:7). The kind of choice referred to in Deuteronomy 30:19 and Joshua 24:14-15 is possible only for those who already believe in Christ. **“The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God”** (1 Corinthians 2:14). Unbelievers can choose to do things that others consider good, but as we saw above, without faith these “good” works do not please God.

Even though unbelievers cannot choose not to sin, God still holds them responsible for their sin. The fact is they are not being forced to sin, but in reality, they enjoy sinning. The unbeliever **“approves of those who practice”** sins of all kinds (Romans 1:32). God uses commands, threats, and promises to control human beings and their sinful urges. Nevertheless, they sin of their own free will and God holds them accountable for these sins. The whole world and everyone in it stand **“guilty before God”** (Romans 3:19).

Questions

1. To what degree do believers and unbelievers have freedom of choice?
2. What choice can unbelievers not make? Why not?
3. Why does it not make sense to human reason that man should be held responsible for his sinning?
4. What is true freedom according to Jesus?
5. How does God give this freedom to human beings?
6. What two forces are found within the Christian?
7. List the things a Christian should do to make a difficult decision.
8. Show from Scripture that God holds each person responsible for his or her actions.



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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?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 5.7 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

God's Concern for Family Life on Earth

Out of love and concern for humanity, God established the institutions of the family and the government. God laid the foundation for family life in the very beginning by instituting marriage. We read in Genesis 1:27-28: **“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’”** In Genesis 2 we are further informed that God made the male human first and then said: **“It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him”** (Genesis 2:18). Since none of the other created beings was a suitable companion for the male, **“the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man”** (Genesis 2:21-22).

In this way God instituted family life: He joined the man and the woman together and gave them the power and the command to reproduce. Genesis 2:24 may be a continuation of what Adam says in Genesis 2:23, but more likely it is a word of God given to Moses concerning marriage: **“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh”** (Genesis 2:24). It was God's intention that infants resulting from the union of husband and wife should be cared for by their father and mother until they reach an age when they themselves are able to form a new family through marriage. Husband and wife are to become one flesh. This union is to be an even closer relationship than the relationship between children and their parents.

When the Pharisees came to Jesus with a question concerning divorce, Jesus pointed them back to God's institution of marriage in Genesis: **“Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate”** (Matthew 19:4-6). Notice that Jesus emphasizes the number **“two”**, and He emphasizes the fact these two are **“male and female.”**

When the Pharisees objected that Moses allowed divorce, Jesus replied: **“Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so”** (Matthew 19:8). Divorce was not God's intention for marriage. Marriage was meant to be a lifelong institution between one man and one woman. God provided marriage as a blessing to all humanity. Marriage provides for companionship and for the bringing of children into the world with a father and a mother.

For believers in Jesus Christ marriage has even more meaning. The apostle Paul points out the connection between Christ and His Church, on one hand, and a husband and wife, on the other: **“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her... This a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church”** (Ephesians 5:22-32).

The apostles Paul and Peter both make the point that the husband, created first at the beginning, is the rightful head of the family. Peter writes: **“Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands...For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed, Abraham, calling him lord”** (1 Peter 3:1-6). Paul establishes the headship principle in his first letter to the Corinthians: **“The head of woman is man,”** and then Paul explains: **“For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but the woman for the man...Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through women, but all things are from God”** (1 Corinthians 11:3, 8-9, 11-12). This order was established at creation.

The Sixth Commandment, **“You shall not commit adultery”** (Exodus 20:14), is part of God’s natural law written in man’s heart. The concept of Marriage is found throughout the world, even among those who do not know Jesus Christ as their Savior. Nevertheless, God’s gift of marriage has been abused by mankind from the very beginning, and it is still being abused today. Polygamy was introduced very early into human history. Lamech, a descendant of Cain, took two wives and showed how he despised God in his heart by saying: **“I have killed a man for wounding me... If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold”** (Genesis 4:19-24). By the days of the patriarchs, polygamy was so common that God did not even put a stop to it among His own people. Abraham, Jacob, Esau, Elkanah, David, Solomon, and many of the kings of Israel and Judah had more than one wife. The Law of God given to Israel even allowed for more than one wife, but we must say with Jesus: **“But from the beginning it was not so”** (Matthew 19:8).

Christians living in the New Testament era are guided by Paul’s clear words to the Corinthians: **“Let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband”** (1 Corinthians 7:2). A spiritual overseer in the church is to be **“the husband of one wife”** (1 Timothy 3:2). This means he is to have eyes for only one woman, his wife. Many a church leader has had his ministry ruined by unfaithfulness in marriage.

The Scriptures list many forms of adultery, which is the corruption of marriage. The Greek word *porneia* (πορνεία, fornication or sexual immorality) covers a multitude of these evils, such as premarital sexual relations, extramarital sexual relations, spouse swapping, promiscuity, same-sex marriage, same-sex sexual relations (homosexuality), group sex, bestiality, prostitution, sex slavery, and pornography. Jesus even considered sexual lust a form of adultery, saying to His disciples: **“Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart”** (Matthew 5:28). All of these sins are contrary to God’s plans for marriage and family life.

There are two instances when God Himself allows a marriage to be broken by divorce. Sexual unfaithfulness on the part of one marriage partner allows the injured partner to declare that the marriage has been broken. Jesus said: **“Whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery”** (Matthew 5:32, the last part of this verse is better translated: **“makes her the victim of adultery”**). Notice that Jesus permits divorce in a case of sexual immorality. The apostle Paul refers to desertion on the part of an unbelieving spouse as another reason to declare the marriage broken. **“If the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases”** (1 Corinthians 7:15). Except for such cases as these, divorce itself is a form of adultery – the breaking of a marriage that God wants to endure until death.

In the home, the mother shares authority with the father. The Fourth Commandment says: **“Honor your father and your mother”** (Exodus 20:12). The wise Solomon taught: **“Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old”** (Proverbs 23:22). As children have responsibility towards their parents, so parents have responsibility regarding their children. In his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, Paul writes: **“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right...And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training**

and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1-4). **“Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged”** (Colossians 3:20-21). Children planning to marry should seek the wise counsel of their parents, who certainly want the best possible spouses for their children. Abraham was concerned with finding a good wife for his son Isaac. Isaac was in turn concerned with finding a suitable wife for his son Jacob. But when Jacob's brother Esau took two wives without Isaac's approval, we read that these wives **“were a grief of mind to Isaac and Rebekah** (Genesis 26:35).

Marriage, however, is a blessing of God for this world only. Jesus clearly taught: **“Those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage”** (Luke 20:35). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) falsely teach that marriage is for eternity. They have no Scriptural basis for this teaching, which goes against the clear teaching of Jesus Himself.

When nations and peoples honor marriage and family life, they generally receive many earthly blessings from God, even if they do not yet know Jesus Christ. When the apostle Paul quoted the Fourth Commandment, he repeated the promise God made in connection with it: **“Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with promise: that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth”** (Ephesians 6:2-3). Earthly blessings will come when God's pattern for marriage and family life is followed. **“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward”** (Psalm 127:3). **“Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun”** (Ecclesiastes 9:9).

When men, in their supposed wisdom, have messed with God's pattern for marriage and family life, the results have been disastrous. When the Roman Catholic Church insisted that their priests not marry and considered unmarried monks and nuns to be holier than married people, this resulted in a tendency toward unnatural arrangements, such as homosexuality and sexual relationships outside of marriage. Easy divorces have led to what has been called “serial polygamy”. Deviation from the sexual patterns ordained by God has led to sexual immorality of all kinds. It has led to broken homes and viewing women as sex objects rather than as real persons for whom Jesus died.

Questions

1. What two institutions has God established for the well-being of man on the earth?
2. When and how did God institute marriage?
3. What has God's design for family life been from the beginning?
4. What is marriage, according to the Bible?
5. What would you say to a polygamist who claims he is following David's example?
6. Why did God allow divorce in Old Testament law?
7. What is the proper relationship between husband and wife?
8. Which forms of *porneia* are most common in your locale?
9. In what situation does God allow divorce?
10. What responsibilities do children and their parents have under God?
11. What are some ways in which fathers could provoke their children to wrath?
12. Why is it important to remember that mothers also have authority over their children?
13. What false conclusions are drawn by Roman Catholic and Mormons concerning marriage?
14. What passages in Holy Scripture deal with homosexuality?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.8 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

God's Concern for Governmental Authority on Earth

Out of love and concern for humanity, God has also instituted governmental authority on earth. Without such governmental authority, life on earth would be chaotic, for no crimes would be punished. The book of Judges describes such a time of lawlessness: **"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes"** (Judges 21:25).

At first, earthly authority was more or less a family affair. As head of the family, the father became also the chief of the tribe. In the days before the flood, God did not call for the death of the murderer Cain. Later Cain's descendant Lamech also became a murderer and dared anyone to punish him for his crimes (Genesis 4:23-24). In those days "might was right", and the rulers of the world were **"giants on the earth," "mighty men who were of old, men of renown"** (Genesis 6:4-5). These men were not necessarily giants in size, but giants in wickedness. The end result was that **"the earth was filled with violence"** (Genesis 6:11).

After the flood, however, God called for the capital punishment of murderers: **"Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed"** (Genesis 9:6). In this way, God established governmental authority by directing human beings to punish human beings who were murderers. God did not establish a particular form of government, such as a monarchy, oligarchy, plutocracy, constitutional republic, or democracy. All such governments, if they hold the actual power of punishing wrong-doing and rewarding well-doing, are God's representatives and carry out His designs. The prophet Daniel declared: **"Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are His. And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise"** (Daniel 2:20-21). God is always in control of all governmental authority. Daniel told King Nebuchadnezzar: **"The God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory"** (Daniel 2:37).

In the days of Jesus, the great governmental authority was the Roman Empire. When Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, claimed that he had power to crucify or release Jesus, Jesus replied: **"You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above"** (John 19:11). Both Paul and Peter taught that all of us who live in a certain jurisdiction are obligated to obey all the laws of the governmental authority over us. We are to regard our government as being in the service of God, who punishes evildoers on earth through the government's temporal authority.

During the days of the mighty Roman Empire, the apostle Paul wrote: **"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain, for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For, because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor"** (Romans 13:1-7).

The apostle Peter brought the same word from God: **“Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good”** (1 Peter 2:13-14).

Government is God’s gift to humanity. Through the government, evil is punished and good is protected. Whatever government is in actual control of a city or country, that particular government has been appointed by God and is God’s minister for carrying out His purposes. God gives government the authority to punish evildoers through physical harm, imprisonment, fines, and even death. The government is also a blessing from God for Christians. That is why Paul tells Timothy to teach his fellow-Christians to pray for governmental authority: **“for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence”** (1 Timothy 2:2).

Jesus Himself paid taxes (Matthew 17:27) and likewise taught the people to **“render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”** (Matthew 22:21). God has given the government authority over such matters as marriage and divorce, injury to life and limb, protection of property, peace and war – in fact all of the items involved in the Second Table of the Law.

Questions

1. How is governmental authority a blessing from God for humanity?
2. How did God institute governmental authority after the flood?
3. What does God say about particular forms of government?
4. Where did King Nebuchadnezzar get his power?
5. Why are governments called the ministers of God?
6. What was Jesus’ conduct towards governmental authority?
7. In what way is governmental authority a special blessing for Christians?
8. What are some of the responsibilities Christians have toward the government?
9. What type of the government has actual authority in your locale?
10. What is your duty towards this government?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.9 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

The Difference between Church and State

God has given governments great authority in this world – the authority to make laws and enforce them. But God has not given the government authority over the Word of God. When the authorities in Jerusalem tried to interfere with the preaching of the Gospel, Peter and John immediately objected to these restrictions. They said they would disobey the rulers' command regardless of the consequences. The Jerusalem authorities **“commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard’”** (Acts 4:18-20). When they then were accused of disobeying government orders, **“Peter and the other apostles answered and said: ‘We ought to obey God rather than men’”** (Acts 5:29).

In this world the followers of Jesus Christ have a higher Head than any governmental authority. Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. God **“gave Him (Jesus) to be head over all things to the church”** (Ephesians 1:22). Christians are called to obey every governmental regulation, even those that are clearly foolish or unreasonable, except those that involve disobedience or disgrace to their Lord and Savior. In the days of the early Christians the governmental authority was the Roman Empire. When a question concerning Christianity came up before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, he handled it wisely. He said: **“If it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves, for I do not want to be a judge of such matters”** (Acts 18:15). He did not want to get involved in governing religion.

When Jesus was questioned by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, concerning His kingdom, Jesus replied: **“My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here”** (John 18:36). Jesus did not deny that He was a king, but He denied that He was an earthly king. He did not rule over His kingdom by physical force. Jesus' kingdom functions through the speaking of spiritual truth.

When Jesus was questioned concerning the payment of taxes to the Romans, Jesus' response astounded His listeners: **“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's”** (Luke 20:25). Clearly church and state are two separate spheres and should remain that way in our thinking and practice.

The government rightly makes and enforces laws in order to accomplish its purpose: the punishment of criminals and the protection of the law-abiding. But Christ's Church does not make laws and enforce them by any type of physical punishment. The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ”** (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). God does His work through His Word. Through His word He converts, strengthens, rebukes, and comforts. The working of Christ's kingdom is compared to the sowing of good seed, which is the Word of God (Matthew 13:18-23).

Christians gather together and form organizations of various kinds with one chief aim: the preaching of the Word of God. It is not the Church's business to make rules for the world. The apostle Paul said:

“What have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges” (1 Corinthians 5:12-13). When those who are inside the Church – fellow-believers and fellow-confessors of Christ – go astray, the only weapon the Church has at its disposal is the Word. The farthest the church can to recover a straying Christian is exclusion or excommunication. This is taught by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-18 and practiced by the congregation in Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

There are many different forms of government in this world. As Christians we should support whatever government is over us by respecting government officials, paying the taxes that are due, obeying all the laws that apply to us, with one big exception: we cannot put governmental authority above God and His Word. We must not let government intimidate us into disobeying our God and quieting our Christian witness. This does not mean that we should ever rebel against the government. It means that we should respectfully disobey human law in order to obey God, and respectfully submit to any punishment imposed on us for our disobedience, even to the point of death. But, no matter what our government does, God wants us always to pray **“for kings and all who are in authority”** (1 Timothy 2:2).

There have been times in history when Christ has blessed His Church with wise governments that have permitted the free preaching of the Gospel. At other times and places Christ has allowed governments to persecute or allow the persecution of Christians, even over many years. Since God works all things together for good to those whom He has called into His Church, we know that God uses both good governments and evil governments for the benefit of His believers. In the early years of Christian persecution under the Roman Empire, one Christian leader stated: “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.” That has proved to be true in the past, and it is still true today in many places. When Paul was imprisoned in Rome because of his Christian testimony, he wrote to his Christian friends in Philippi: **“I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel”** (Philippians 1:12).

In the time of the Lutheran Reformation, the preaching of the Gospel was supported by many leaders in civil government. Nevertheless, Martin Luther and his associates clearly taught the Biblical truth of the distinction between church and state. But in the years that followed, the Lutherans in various European countries allowed the government to wield too much control over church affairs. When Lutherans migrated to the United States and other countries, however, they were able in many cases to enjoy the blessings of separation between church and state. Whether such blessings will continue is in God’s hands. We know there are many countries in the world today that persecute Christians to one degree or another. We need to support such Christians in whatever way we can.

The *Augsburg Confession* discusses the distinction between church and state in Articles XVI and XXVIII. We print a small portion of Article XXVIII here: *“Our people have been compelled, for the sake of comforting consciences, to indicate the difference between spiritual and secular power, sword, and authority. They have taught that, for the sake of God’s command, everyone should honor and esteem with all reverence both authorities and powers as the two highest gifts of God on earth. Our people teach as follows. According to the gospel the power of the keys or of the bishops is a power of God and command of God to preach the gospel, to forgive or retain sins, and to administrate and distribute the sacraments... Secular authority deals with matters altogether different from the gospel. Secular power does not protect the soul but, using the sword and physical penalties, it protects the body and goods against external violence”* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 92).

Questions

1. Why did Peter and John deliberately disobey the Jerusalem authorities?
2. Why did the proconsul Gallio refuse to give judgment on the matter before him?
3. How did Jesus distinguish between His kingdom and earthly kingdoms?
4. What does Jesus use to rule in His kingdom?
5. Which weapons should the Church refuse to use in its work?
6. What is the function of Christ's Church?
7. What is the function of secular government?
8. What did Paul mean when he talked about those inside and those outside?
9. What is the strongest discipline the Christian Church can use?
10. Are there any forms of secular government that have been ordered by God? Explain your answer.
11. What kind of secular government is in power in your locale?
12. To what extent should you obey this government?
13. How should a Christian react to persecution from the government?
14. What should secular government do when Christians are being persecuted?
15. What should secular government do when Muslims are being persecuted?
16. What mistake was made by European Lutherans regarding the distinction between church and state?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 5.10 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

God's Use of Miracles in His Preservation of the World

Sometimes God chooses to do His work through miracles. A miracle is something that God does outside the normal laws of nature. For example, when God wanted the Israelites to cross the Red Sea to escape the pursuing Egyptian forces, He made the water gather up in heaps on both sides of the dry path that He made for them. As soon as they were across, He made the water behave as it normally behaves, and the Egyptians were drowned. Psalm 33:7 says: **“He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap.”** And Psalm 78:13 tells: **“He divided the sea and caused them to pass through; and He made the waters stand up like a heap.”**

The original languages of the Bible and most translations use various words to convey the idea of a miracle. For example, they are called “wonders”, “miracles”, “marvelous works”, “wondrous works”, “wonderful works”, “signs”, “mighty deeds”, “mighty acts”, “powers”, or “mighty works”.

Only God can perform true miracles. After the Israelites crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, they sang these words: **“Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?”** (Exodus 15:11). Psalm 72:18 says: **“Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, who only does wondrous things!”**

God alone decides when and how to do miracles. We should be on guard against so-called faith healers, who claim to be able to do miracles with the power of God. Many of these faith healers have proved to be frauds, and they can do real damage. For example, they can deter sick people from using the normal means God has already provided for their cure, such as medicine, surgery, and a genuine doctor's expertise. If a faith-healer fails to work a cure, he may blame the person and say that if the faith of the sick person had been greater, the person would have been cured. This can make the sick person doubt whether they are a true Christian. God can do miracles today, but not at the command of a healer. Moreover, faith healers generally try to attain glory and acclaim for themselves rather than give glory to God.

There have been periods in history when God has chosen to do many miracles. For example: the days of Moses and Joshua when God led the Israelites from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan; the days of the prophets Elijah and Elisha when God chose to prove His superiority over the idols of the Canaanites; and the days of Jesus and His apostles when God chose to demonstrate that Jesus Himself was God and that His apostles were associated with Him. Apart from these examples in history, miracles have been quite rare.

Joseph and Daniel were given special dreams from God, and they were given the interpretations of other men's dreams as well. When the Pharaoh's butler and baker had dreams that troubled them, their fellow-prisoner Joseph said to them: **“Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please”** (Genesis 40:8). Then when the Pharaoh himself had a troubling dream, Joseph said to him: **“It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace”** (Genesis 41:16). Daniel also was quick to give glory to God rather than to himself. He said to King Nebuchadnezzar: **“There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days... This secret has not been revealed to me because I have more wisdom than anyone living”** (Daniel 2:28-30).

God has occasionally used dreams to reveal things to others in the past, like Joseph (Matthew 1:20; 2:13, 19) and the wise men from the East (Matthew 2:12); however, God nowhere promises to reveal things to us through dreams and we should not expect Him to reveal things to us through dreams. In fact, God warned against false prophets who announced their dreams: **“I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ How long will this be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My name for Baal. The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?’ says the LORD”** (Jeremiah 23:25-28). In these verses God clearly distinguishes between His word and a dream. God says that dreams are chaff, but His word is nourishing wheat. Hebrews 1:1-2 tell us: **“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.”** Jesus is the ultimate revelation from God. Jesus and His apostles point us to the words they spoke and wrote as the true word of God and our source of life and faith.

There is one big difference between the miracles of prophets and apostles, on the one hand, and the miracles of Jesus, on the other. Jesus did His miracles by His own divine power to reveal His own glory. On the occasion of Jesus’ first miracle of changing water into wine, John records: **“This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory”** (John 2:11). The prophets and apostles, however, did their mighty wonders at God’s direction and by His power to bring glory to Him. After Peter healed the crippled beggar at the gate of the temple, he said to the crowd that gathered: **“Why look so intensely at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? ...His name (the name of Jesus), through faith in His name, has made this man strong”** (Acts 3:11, 16).

At times God has allowed His enemies (such as Satan and unbelievers) to do wonders that seem like genuine miracles of God. Pharaoh’s sorcerers were able to duplicate the wonders that Moses and Aaron were doing up to a point. The Bible says these sorcerers threw down their rods and they became serpents, **“but Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods”** (Exodus 7:12). Somehow these sorcerers were enabled to make water into blood and to produce frogs on the land, but there was a limit to what they could do; after Aaron’s rod struck the dust and it became lice, the sorcerers were not able to duplicate this miracle and they had to give up. They told Pharaoh: **“This is the finger of God”** (Exodus 8:19).

God has never wanted His people to turn away from Him because of deceiving miracle-workers. Moses warned the Israelites: **“If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods which you have not known, and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul”** (Deuteronomy 13:1-3). Likewise, Jesus warned His disciples: **“False christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand”** (Matthew 24:24-25). In particular, the apostle Paul foretold that the coming of the great Antichrist (the papacy) **“is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved”** (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10).

Today many Christians, both true Christians and those who are Christians only in name, are entranced by the so-called charismatic or Pentecostal movement. The charismatic/Pentecostal movement claims that the signs and wonders done by the apostles are still being done regularly today through certain healers, tongue-speakers, and prophets. However, when the teaching of these charismatic leaders is compared with Scripture, we see that they are false teachers. The Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself. What is recorded in Scripture is from the Holy Spirit; we can depend on what the Bible says. We cannot, however, trust the sayings and deeds of someone who claims the Holy Spirit is speaking

and working through him if his teaching and practice does not agree with the Scriptures or goes beyond the Scriptures. God does His miracles as a part of His plan to save us, not for our entertainment or to satisfy our curiosity. Jesus did no miracles for King Herod who **“hoped to see some miracle done by Him”** (Luke 23:8).

John explained the main purpose of Jesus’ miracles: **“Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name”** (John 20:30-31). The miracles done by the apostles in the early days of the Church also had a special purpose: **“They went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs”** (Mark 16:20). The purpose of the miracles they did was to confirm that they spoke God’s Word.

The purpose of the miracles in the apostolic era has been served. We now have the full apostolic witness in the Scriptures. There is no longer any need or expectation of ongoing Pentecostal or charismatic miracles in our time. The miracles recorded in Scripture are sufficient to confirm God’s message of salvation. **“How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?”** (Hebrews 2:3-4).

God wants us to call on Him in the day of trouble. In answer to our prayers God may work a miracle. That is, He may do something beyond the laws of nature. But most often God works within the laws of nature by providing healing and protection by ordinary means. In one sense, everything God does is a miracle, for He is the only One who can do it. Only God can create a world out of nothing. Only God has holy angels to do His bidding for the benefit of His people. Only God can create life through the natural means that only He has devised: through seeds and reproductive processes of His own design. He makes the wind blow and the earth shake. He makes the waters flow and He dries up the ground. Above all, only God can save sinful mankind, and He has chosen to do so through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through the working of the Holy Spirit, God creates faith in Christ and strengthen that faith to the end. Only God can carry out the great miracle of the end of the world, the universal resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment. **“Many, O LORD my God, are Your wonderful works which You have done; and Your thoughts toward us cannot be recounted to You in order; if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered”** (Psalm 40:5).

Questions

1. What is a miracle?
2. List five miracles that occurred in Old Testament times.
3. List five miracles that occurred in New Testament times.
4. Who is the only one who can perform a miracle?
5. Why must we be cautious concerning the claims of faith healers?
6. What were three periods in history when many miracles were performed?
7. Why did Joseph and Daniel give credit to God for interpretation of the dreams they interpreted?
8. Give some examples of signs and wonders done by false teachers.
9. What test should be given to all who claim to do wonders in Christ’s name?
10. What is the main purpose of the miracles recorded in the Bible?
11. Which charismatic groups are prevalent in your locale?
12. On what basis should these groups be evaluated?
13. In what sense can everything God does be called a miracle?
14. What are the usual ways in which God provides help for His people?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.11 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

God's Use of Prophecy in Proving His Control of Earthly Events

Since God is all-knowing, He knows everything that will happen in the future. Therefore, at any time He chooses, God can foretell or prophesy future events. The prophet Isaiah was given advance information concerning the future of his people. Through him God challenged the false gods to duplicate God's ability to foretell the future and the false gods could not do anything of the kind. We read in Isaiah 41:21-24: **“Present your case,’ says the LORD. ‘Bring forth your strong reasons,’ says the King of Jacob. ‘Let them bring forth and show us what will happen; let them show the former things, what they were, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare to us things to come. Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; yes, do good or do evil, that we may be dismayed and see it together. Indeed you are nothing, and your work is nothing; he who chooses you is an abomination.”**

God proved that He is the true God. He is the only God, for the things He foretold in times past have all happened as He said, except for things that are still yet to come. One of Isaiah's prophecies foretold the coming of a ruler named Cyrus who would set the Israelites free from their captivity in Babylon at some future time (Isaiah 44:24–45:7). This is such a remarkable prophecy because it is so specific. Many claim that Isaiah could not possibly have known the name of a man who was not yet born, and therefore they say that these words must have been written by a later prophet who wrote after the prophecy had already been fulfilled. But surely it should not be hard for us to believe that the God who created and preserves the world is able give the name of a specific person who would live a hundred years in the future. God declares: **“Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things do I declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them”** (Isaiah 42:9). **“I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God. And who can proclaim as I do?”** (Isaiah 44:6-7).

God told His prophet Jeremiah to give a message to the kings of the nations surrounding Israel, informing them of coming events: **“I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are on the ground, by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and have given it to whom it seemed proper to Me. And now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant; and the beasts of the field I have also given him to serve him. So all nations shall serve him and his son and his son's son, until the time of his land comes; and then many nations and great kings shall make him serve them”** (Jeremiah 27:5-7). All of this happened as God foretold.

God foretold another series of future events to His prophet Daniel. He told Daniel about future kingdoms of the world and the future of the people of Israel. Since the things that Daniel foretold accurately came to pass several centuries later, many unbelievers say that this so-called prophecy must have been written after the events. But there is no evidence in the Bible or elsewhere that it was not Daniel who wrote the words of this prophecy long in advance of the events that were foretold.

The most wonderful prophecies of the future talk about the coming of the Messiah. God Himself gave the first promise in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:15). He repeated that promise to Noah and to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob). God generally employed believing members of His family to speak these prophecies (Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel), but in one case He used the heathen prophet Balaam to bless His people and remind them of the coming Messiah: **“I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob, a Scepter shall rise out of Israel”**

(Numbers 24:17). Matthew and other New Testament evangelists and apostles point out how these prophecies were fulfilled by Jesus.

Jesus and His apostles also foretold future events. For example, Jesus told His disciples that Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed (Mark 13:1-2). The fact that this prophecy has been fulfilled assures us that everything else Jesus and His apostles foretold will likewise come to pass, including Jesus' return on the Last Day and the great judgment that will follow His return. On the night of His arrest Jesus told His enemies: **"The Scriptures must be fulfilled"** (Mark 14:49).

Sometimes God's prophets were given information that seems quite trivial. For example, the prophet Samuel told Saul: **"As for your donkeys that were lost three days ago, do not be anxious about them, for they have been found"** (1 Samuel 9:20). But such cases helped to establish the authenticity of God's prophets, so that the people would believe them when they proclaimed the future days of the Messiah. God's plans and promises center on Christ and His work of bringing us salvation. This will become clear to all the world, not just to Christians, when Jesus returns as He promised. **"This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven"** (Acts 1:11).

Questions

1. How did God challenge the false gods in the time of Isaiah?
2. How did God show Himself to be far superior to all idols?
3. Which person did Isaiah mention by name long before he was even born?
4. Why do many Bible students believe that Isaiah could not have written this?
5. Which prophets of God foretold things about future kingdoms?
6. What are some of the promises of the Messiah given in the Old Testament?
7. When did God use even an unbeliever to prophesy about the Messiah?
8. What did Jesus believe about all Scriptural prophecies?
9. What prophecies remain to be fulfilled in the future?
10. Why can we be sure that these prophecies will be fulfilled?
11. How does fulfilled prophecy show that God is in control of all events?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.12 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

The Relationship between Prayer and God's Preservation

The relationship between our prayers and God's control and authority over everything that happens is a topic that is far beyond our understanding. According to our human thinking, if God has everything already planned out and He knows what is going to happen in the future, how can our prayers to Him make any difference? On the other hand, if our prayers move Him to change His actions, how then can He be in control of all things in advance? As with many things that God's Word teaches, we teach only what the Bible says without any alterations. Only God knows how it all fits together. If we could understand all the ways of God, we would be equal with God rather than being His dependent creatures.

God says that He hears and answers the prayers and petitions of His children. God's prophet Zechariah declared: **"They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'This is My people'; and each one will say, 'The LORD is my God'"** (Zechariah 13:9). David taught that God hears the prayers of His people. David experienced this many times in his own life. He said: **"The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles"** (Psalm 34:17). **"He hears the prayer of the righteous"** (Proverbs 15:29). In His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) Jesus talked about prayer at length – both the false prayers of the hypocrites and the genuine prayers of those who trust in Him. He taught His disciples a prayer that they could use as a model for their prayers: the so-called Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:8-13). Jesus also encouraged His disciples to pray by promising that His Father would hear their prayers and answer them. **"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you"** (Matthew 7:7).

Since God hears and answers prayer, the prayers of His people have a great influence on God's government of the world. When the apostle Paul was a prisoner in Rome, he wrote to his friend Philemon: **"Prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you"** (Philemon 1:22). Paul says that Philemon's prayers for him would influence God to have Paul released from prison so that he would be able to visit him. Similarly, Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi: **"I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ"** (Philippians 1:19).

Jesus' brother James wrote about the effects and results of prayer. He said: **"The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up"** (James 5:15). Also: **"Pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit"** (James 5:16-18).

From God's perspective, everything happens according to His will. God has a plan for our lives, and He will see to it that this plan is fulfilled. From our point of view, however, our prayers do make a difference. Things happen differently when we pray about them from what would have happened if we had not prayed about them. God from eternity has woven the prayers of His children into His plan for the world. Since God foreknows what His children are going to pray, He has His answers to their prayers already in mind before they pray. As Jesus said: **"Your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him"** (Matthew 6:8). At the same time God wants us to pray to him. Like a loving

Father, He wants to hear from His beloved children, but God does not force His children to pray; we pray of our own free will; we pray because we want to pray. This is beyond our full understanding.

Through Isaiah, God assures us: **“It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear”** (Isaiah 65:24). God hears and answers every prayer, but not necessarily in the way we would like it to be answered. God may answer our prayers by denying what we ask for, because what we want is not the best for us. Jesus taught us to pray to our heavenly Father: **“Your will be done”** (Matthew 6:10). John explains: **“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us”** (1 John 5:14). God knows what is best for us and He will answer our prayers in the best way.

Usually our God wants that **“supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men”** (1 Timothy 2:1), but there was a time when God said to His prophet Jeremiah: **“Do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you”** (Jeremiah 7:16; also Jeremiah 11:14). In the same way Jesus’ apostle John wrote: **“There is sin leading to death. I do not say he should pray about that”** (1 John 5:16). When we do not know God’s will, we need to leave the answer entirely to Him and say: “If it is Your will.”

We should not let thoughts of God’s providence and preservation prevent us or hinder us from praying. We should pray to our God fervently and believe that He will answer our prayers in the way that best benefits His Church. For **“we know 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). Jesus, the holy Son of God, found it spiritually necessary to spend great amounts of His time praying to His Father. If Jesus felt this need to pray, how much more should we feel the need for prayer to God in all circumstances!

Questions

1. Why does the doctrine of God’s providence lead some to believe that prayer is futile?
2. Why do we know that prayer to God by a believer is not futile?
3. What did Jesus say about prayer in His Sermon on the Mount?
4. How did Paul express his belief that prayer influences God?
5. How did James express his belief that prayer influences God?
6. How can God answer prayers and at the same time have all things planned out from the beginning?
7. Why does God answer some prayers by denying us what we are asking for?
8. What should we add to our prayers if we do not know what God’s will is?
9. For whom should we make intercession, according to Paul’s words to Timothy?
10. Why did God tell Jeremiah to not pray for the people?
11. What confidence should we have in God when we pray to Him?
12. To what extent is prayer practiced by the Christians in your locale?
13. What is the difference between the prayers of Christians and the prayers of non-Christians?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 5.13 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

God's Hand in the Length of Our Lives

In His providence God has determined the length of life of each individual in the world. Our length of life in this world is our time of grace, that is, a time during which we may hear the Gospel of Christ, believe in Him, and gain eternal life. In a general way God regulates the lives of all peoples on earth. He determines where they will live and all the circumstances of their lives. Paul told 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"** (Acts 17:26-27).

Average length of life has varied at different times and in different places. But basically, what Moses wrote in Psalm 90 is still true: **"The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away"** (Psalm 90:10). In comparison with the eternal God, our time on earth is as nothing. **"Lord, make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am. Indeed, You have made my days as handbreadths, and my age is as nothing before You; certainly every man at his best state is but vapor"** (Psalm 39:4-5).

Job knew that God had determined exactly how long he would live. He said: **"Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower and fades away; he flees like a shadow and does not continue... Since his days are determined, the number of his months is with You; You have appointed his limits, so that he cannot pass"** (Job 14:1-5). Because God has determined the length of our lives, we join David in saying: **"As for me, I trust in You, O LORD; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in Your hand"** (Psalm 31:14-15).

God does not normally preserve our lives through miracles, but rather by natural means. He gives us a longer life by letting us make healthful choices and by keeping us away from that which would shorten our lives. God promises a long life in connection with the fourth commandment, but sometimes He does the opposite and takes a young person to Himself. God may do this so that the believer does not have to face God's earthly judgments on human sins. For example, God's prophet Ahijah told King Jeroboam and his wife that their child would die. And then Ahijah said: **"All Israel shall mourn for him and bury him, for he is the only one of Jeroboam who shall come to the grave, because in him there is found something good toward the LORD God of Israel in the house of Jeroboam"** (1 Kings 14:13).

When the apostle Paul and the 276 who were traveling with him were shipwrecked after a terrible storm at sea, God told Paul: **"Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you"** (Acts 27:24). Paul had this assurance from God; yet when the sailors tried to escape, Paul saw what they were doing, and he warned the centurion in time to prevent their escape. A little later, the soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners, including Paul, but the centurion would not permit them to do so. In other words, it was through the actions of Paul and the centurion that God kept His promise so that **"they all escaped safely to land"** (Acts 27:44).

We see God's hand in the life of King Hezekiah. God sent His prophet Isaiah to King Hezekiah with this message: **"Thus says the LORD: 'Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live'"** (2 Kings

20:1). But after Hezekiah prayed to the Lord for an extension of his life, God sent Isaiah back to him again with this message: **“I will add to your days fifteen years”** (2 Kings 20:6). **“Then Isaiah said, ‘Take a lump of figs.’ So they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered”** (2 Kings 20:7).

Just as we do not know the day of the world’s end, neither do we know the day of our own end. We should be always ready. Jesus told a parable of a foolish man who built some barns. This man was not ready for his own death: **“Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: ‘The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, “What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?” So he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.’” But God said to him, “Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?” So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God”** (Luke 12:16-21).

Questions

1. What is meant by a time of grace?
2. How long did Moses say a man’s life generally lasted? (Note: Moses lived to be 120)
3. Which passages state that God determines the length of a person’s life?
4. How does God usually keep people alive?
5. Why does God sometimes take His children to Himself when they are young?
6. How did God preserve the lives of the 276 passengers on Paul’s ship?
7. What led God to extend King Hezekiah’s life?
8. Why was the barn builder in Jesus’ parable a fool?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 5.14 – The Doctrine of Providence or Preservation

Accidents or Chance?

Many people in the world today do not believe there is any design or purpose in what happens in our world. In fact, they even believe that the existence and development of the world is merely a chance event – an accident, so to speak – unplanned and undesigned by anyone. We also often talk about “accidents” and “coincidences”.

The Bible also itself addresses us from our point of view and speaks of chance and accident. For example, God’s law made a distinction between a killer who premeditated his crime and a killer who **“did not lie in wait”** (Exodus 21:13-14) but killed someone by accident. The law also distinguished between a man who throws a stone at someone to hurt him and a man who **“uses a stone, by which a man could die, throwing it at him without seeing him, so that he dies, while he was not his enemy or seeking his harm”** (Numbers 35:23). In another example, God’s prophet told King Ahab in advance that King Ahab would die in an upcoming battle. To try to protect himself, Ahab disguised himself, and none of the enemy forces chased him to kill him. But the Bible account says: **“Now a certain man drew a bow at random, and struck the king of Israel between the joints of his armor”** (1 Kings 22:34). From our point of view it was only by chance that Ahab was struck in this way, but from God’s point of view this happened exactly as God designed it. As far as God is concerned, there is no such thing as chance or an accident.

The book of Ecclesiastes views things in two ways: “under the sun”, and according to God’s viewpoint. The author says: **“I returned and saw under the sun that – The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all”** (Ecclesiastes 9:11). The fastest man does not always win the race, because something happens to prevent it. Is this chance or accident? From man’s point of view, it is by chance or an accident. But God controls all events, and He has reasons for what He does or allows to happen, even though we may never know what those reasons are.

In His parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus Himself spoke of chance. He said that when the wounded man was lying by the roadside, **“by chance a certain priest came down that road”** (Luke 10:31). This is the way we ordinarily speak, and Jesus spoke that way too. But since God Himself is in control of all things (without exception), there is really no such thing as “chance”. With God there are no accidents. God’s spokesman Isaiah says: **“I, the LORD, do all these things”** (Isaiah 45:7). Jeremiah understood that the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple was no accident. **“Who is he who speaks and it comes to pass, when the Lord has not commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that woe and well-being proceed?”** (Lamentations 3:37-38). The prophet Amos also testified: **“If there is calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done it?”** (Amos 3:6).

In our thinking and speaking we need to recognize that the idea of mere chance events denies the fact that God is complete control of the world. But on the other hand, we dare not teach that since everything happens under God’s control, we have no responsibility for anything that happens. We are not fatalists¹ or determinists², but we teach both God’s absolute control and human responsibility,

¹ Fatalists believe that everything that happens is predetermined and inevitable.

² Determinists believe that everything is determined or caused by an outside force or by a person’s previous choices.

without trying to figure out how these two things fit together.

Questions

1. What do some people mean when they say that our world came into being by chance?
2. What distinction does God's law make between intentional murder and accidental murder?
3. How was King Ahab killed?
4. What had God said about King Ahab's death?
5. Explain the phrase: "**Time and chance happen to them all**" (Ecclesiastes 9:11).
6. Why is nothing an accident from God's point of view?
7. What are two opposite errors that we need to avoid in our thinking and speaking?