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Teaching Notes

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John Calvin on the Doctrine of Providence



Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. - Matthew 10:29

[God] is deemed omnipotent, not because he can indeed act, yet sometimes ceases and sits in idleness, or continues by a general impulse that order of nature which he previously appointed; but because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so regulates all things that nothing takes place without his deliberation. (*Institutes*, 1.16.3)

I. God by His Power Nourishes, Maintains and Rules the World by His Providence

[Institutes of the Christian Religion, Chapter XVI]

A. God's Special Providence Asserted, Against the Opinions of Philosophers

1. Creation and Providence Inseparably Joined

Moreover, to make God a momentary Creator, who once for all finished his work, would be cold and barren, and we must differ from profane men especially in that we see the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception... (*Institutes*, 1.16.1)

Psalm 104:27-30 These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. ²⁸ When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. ²⁹ When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. ³⁰ When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.

Acts 17:28 For in him we live and move and have our being.

2. There is No Such Thing as Fortune or Chance

- a. Non-Christians usually resort to “luck” or “fortune” or “chance” to discuss seemingly random events of life
- b. A Christian ought never to do so

Suppose a man falls among thieves, or wild beasts; is shipwrecked at sea by a sudden gale; is killed by a falling house or tree. Suppose another man wandering through the desert finds help in his straits; having been tossed by the waves, reaches harbor; miraculously escapes death by a finger's breadth. Carnal reason ascribes all such happenings, whether prosperous or adverse, to fortune. But anyone who has been taught by Christ's lips that all the hairs of his head are numbered [Matthew 10:30] will look farther afield for a cause, and will consider that all events are governed by God's secret plan. (*Institutes*, 1.16.2)

- c. The sun has a huge role to play in the sustaining of life on earth: it gives light, heat, nourishes and quickens all living things, bringing harvests, etc. BUT GOD, to claim the whole credit for these things, waited until the fourth day of creation to make the sun!! He did them Himself on the third day after making the plants... sustaining them with the light He created at the beginning

Therefore a godly man will not make the sun either the principal or the necessary cause of these things which existed before the creation of the sun, but merely the instrument that God uses because he so wills; for with no more difficulty he might abandon it, and act through himself. (*Institutes*, 1.16.2)

3. God's Providence Governs All

- a. God's omnipotence is not merely theoretical, but "watchful, effective, active... engaged in ceaseless activity"
- b. When Psalm 115:3 says

"Our God is in heaven; he does whatever he wills"

it refers to a "a certain deliberate will"... God actively willing certain things

- c. God's rule should not be confined to natural principles... as though God were somehow locked into the physics of what He originally made
- d. We should not fear nature as though it had some irrational independent power to harm us

... there is no erratic power, or action, or motion in creatures, but that they are governed by God's secret plan in such a way that nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by him. (*Institutes*, 1.16.3)

4. The Nature of Providence

- a. Not mere foreknowledge

At the outset, then, let my readers grasp that providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven ¹⁴⁹¹ what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events. Thus it pertains no less to his hands than to his eyes. (*Institutes*, 1.16.4)

- b. God will provide = God will act to supply

- i) The Latin term *provideo* literally means "to see ahead of time" and could imply mere foreknowledge
- ii) However, we often use the expressions "see to it" or "look after them" to mean an active care and supply of all needs that the situation calls for
- iii) When Abraham says to Isaac, "The Lord will provide" and when it is said "On the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided"

- c. "General" and "Special" providence

- i) Calvin refutes the notion that allows God some indefinable, ambiguous, vague control but which keeps man's will at the center of things

ii) God's providence means active rulership

What, I pray you, is it to have control but so to be in authority that you rule in a determined order those things over which you are placed? (1.16.4)

iii) Yet Scripture does assert that God exerts a special care over some of His creatures more than others

iv) This is merely a subset of His universal (general) providence

... we must prove God so attends to the regulation of individual events, and they all so proceed from his set plan, that nothing takes place by chance. (1.16.4)

B. Doctrine of Special Providence Supported by Scripture

1. God's Providence Also Directs the Individual

a. Many verses describe God's control over events of nature... "good" and "bad"

In the Law and in the Prophets, he often declares that as often as he waters the earth with dews and rain he testifies to his favor; but when the heaven is hardened like iron at his command, the grainfields consumed by a blight and other harmful things, as often as the fields are struck with hail and storms, these are a sign of his certain and special vengeance. If we accept these things, it is certain that not one drop of rain falls without God's sure command (1.16.5)

b. God establishes both the regular patterns of nature, and their interruptions

2. God's Providence Especially Relates to Mankind

a. Scripture clearly testifies to the sovereignty of God over human decisions

Jeremiah 10:23 I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps.

Proverbs 20:24 A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?

Proverbs 16:9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

b. Some people wrongly try to come to intermediate positions on how God's sovereignty relates to human will

Let them now say that man is moved by God according to the inclination of his nature, but that he himself turns that motion whither he pleases. (1.16.6)

c. Calvin rejects these positions

Nay, if that were truly said, the free choice of his ways would be in man's control. Perhaps they will deny this because he can do nothing without God's power. Yet they cannot really

get by with that, since it is clear that the prophet and Solomon ascribe to God not only might but also choice and determination. Elsewhere Solomon elegantly rebukes this rashness of men, who set up for themselves a goal without regard to God, as if they were not led by his hand.

Proverbs 16:1 To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue.

It is an absurd folly that miserable men take it upon themselves to act without God, when they cannot even speak except as he wills! (1.16.6)

- d. Scripture reveals that God rules over even the most random, seemingly “fortuitous” occurrences; he cites the example of a branch falling from a tree and killing a passing traveler; Calvin says Scripture ascribes even such random events to the Lord

Exodus 21:12-13 Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. ¹³ However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God lets it happen, he is to flee to a place I will designate.

Deuteronomy 19:5 For instance, a man may go into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and as he swings his ax to fell a tree, the head may fly off and hit his neighbor and kill him. That man may flee to one of these cities and save his life.

- e. So also the casting of the lot

Proverbs 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

- f. And the elevating of one man over another

Psalm 75:6-7 No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. ⁷ But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.

3. God’s Providence Also Regulates ‘Natural Occurrences’

- a. For example... winds! Like the wind that brought the Israelites the quail, and the wind that brought the storm to Jonah’s ship

[From these examples] I infer that no wind ever arises or increases except by God’s express command. (1.16.7)

- b. If God did not control the winds, he could not say “He makes the winds His messengers...” (Psalm 104:3-4)

- c. So also elsewhere, the weather at sea is ascribed to God

Psalm 107:25-26, 29-30 For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. ²⁶ They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths... ²⁹ He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. ³⁰ They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven.

d. So also birth

So too, although the power to procreate is naturally implanted in men, yet God would have it accounted to his special favor that he leaves some in barrenness, but graces others with offspring (1.16.7)

e. And eating bread... the most natural and commonplace occurrence

... there is nothing more ordinary in nature than for us to be nourished by bread. Yet the Spirit declares not only that the produce of the earth is God's special gift but that "men do not live by bread alone"; because it is not plenty itself that nourishes men, but God's secret blessing; just as conversely he threatens that he is going to "take away the stay of bread" [Isaiah 3:1]. And indeed, that earnest prayer for daily bread [Matthew 6:11] could be understood only in the sense that God furnishes us with food by his fatherly hand. (1.16.7)

C. Discussion of Fortune, Chance, and Contingency

1. The Doctrine of Providence is No Stoic Belief in Fate

a. For the Stoics, the universe was as a machine, inexorably moving to some preordained conclusion, carried it there by the very nature of the machine itself

b. Biblically, providence is tied directly to a God's very personal wisdom

We make God the ruler and governor of all things, who in accordance with his wisdom has from the farthest limit of eternity decreed what he was going to do, and now by his might carries out what he has decreed. From this we declare that not only heaven and earth and the inanimate creatures, but also the plans and intentions of men, are so governed by his providence that they are borne by it straight to their appointed end. (1.16.8)

c. God must be understood as the ultimate cause of all things

... nothing is more absurd than that anything should happen without God's ordaining it, because it would then happen without any cause (1.16.8)

2. The True Causes of Events Are Hidden to Us

a. The concept of random or "lucky" occurrences merely stems from human ignorance of God's plans and purposes

But since the order, reason, end, and necessity of those things which happen for the most part lie hidden in God's purpose, and are not apprehended by human opinion, those things, which it is certain take place by God's will, are in a sense fortuitous. (1.16.9)

b. Example

Let us imagine, for example, a merchant who, entering a wood with a company of faithful men, unwisely wanders away from his companions, and in his wandering comes upon a

robber's den, falls among thieves, and is slain. His death was not only foreseen by God's eye, but also determined by his decree. For it is not said that he foresaw how long the life of each man would extend, but that he determined and fixed the bounds that men cannot pass [Job 14:5]. Yet as far as the capacity of our mind is concerned, all things therein seem fortuitous. (1.16.9)

- c. "Fate" is mentioned in Ecclesiastes... but only to recognize the fact that human minds, "under the sun" cannot see what God is doing

Ecclesiastes 9:11 I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.

- d. Contingency dictated by the plans and promises of God: necessity comes from the mind of God, not from nature itself

... what God has determined must necessarily so take place, even though it is neither unconditionally, nor of its own peculiar nature, necessary. A familiar example presents itself in the bones of Christ. When he took upon himself a body like our own, no sane man will deny that his bones were fragile; yet it was impossible to break them [John 19:33, 36]. Whence again we see that distinctions concerning relative necessity and absolute necessity, likewise of consequent and consequence, were not recklessly invented in schools, when God subjected to fragility the bones of his Son, which he had exempted from being broken, and thus restricted to the necessity of his own plan what could have happened naturally.

[In other words, by the will of God, Christ's bones were the most unbreakable substance on earth; but their unbreakability had its origin not in their intrinsic nature, but in God's purposes for those bones]

II. How We May Apply This Doctrine to Our Greatest Benefit

[*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Chapter XVII]

A. Interpretation of Providence with Reference to the Past and the Future

1. The Meaning of God's Ways

But we must so cherish moderation that we do not try to make God render account to us, but so reverence his secret judgments as to consider his will the truly just cause of all things. When dense clouds darken the sky, and a violent tempest arises, because a gloomy mist is cast over our eyes, thunder strikes our ears and all our senses are benumbed with fright, everything seems to us to be confused and mixed up; but all the while a constant quiet and serenity ever remain in heaven. So must we infer that, while the disturbances in the world deprive us of judgment, God out of the pure light of his justice and wisdom tempers and directs these very movements in the best-conceived order to a right end. And

surely on this point it is sheer folly that many dare with greater license to call God's works to account, and to examine his secret plans, and to pass as rash a sentence on matters unknown as they would on the deeds of mortal men. (1.17.1)

2. God's Rule Will Be Observed with Respect

... in the law and the gospel are comprehended mysteries which tower far above the reach of our senses. But since God illumines the minds of his own with the spirit of discernment for the understanding of these mysteries which he has deigned to reveal by his Word, now no abyss is here; rather, a way in which we ought to walk in safety, and a lamp to guide our feet.... (1.17.2)

3. God's Providence Does Not Relieve Us From Responsibility

- a. Calvin addressed the issue of those who go too far with the concept of providence
- b. They say that God willed whatsoever came to pass so they cannot be held responsible for what they did

Then whatever does happen now, they so impute to God's providence that they close their eyes to the man who clearly has done it. Does an assassin murder an upright citizen? He has carried out, they say, God's plan. Has someone stolen, or committed adultery? Because he has done what was foreseen and ordained by the Lord, he is the minister of God's providence. Has a son, neglecting remedies, with never a care awaited the death of a parent? He could not resist God, who had so appointed from eternity. Thus all crimes, because subject to God's ordinance, they call virtues. (1.17.3)

4. God's Providence Does Not Excuse Us from Due Prudence

... if the Lord has committed to us the protection of our life, our duty is to protect it; if he offers helps, to use them; if he forewarns us of dangers, not to plunge headlong; if he makes remedies available, not to neglect them. (1.17.4)

5. God's Providence Does Not Free Us from Blame for Our Wickedness

Why therefore, they ask, should a thief be punished, who plundered someone whom the Lord would punish with poverty? Why shall a murderer be punished, who has killed one whose life the Lord had ended? If all such men are serving God's will, why shall they be punished? On the contrary, I deny that they are serving God's will. For we shall not say that one who is motivated by an evil inclination, by only obeying his own wicked desire, renders service to God at His bidding. (1.17.5)

Clear example of this in Scripture... God's use of the Assyrians to destroy Israel, and then His judgment of them for doing it!!

Isaiah 10:5-7 "Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! ⁶ I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me, to seize loot

and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets. ⁷ But this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations.

B. Meditating on the Ways of God in Providence: The Happiness of Recognizing God's Providence

1. God's Providence as a Solace for Believers

There are very many and very clear promises that testify that God's singular providence watches over the welfare of believers: "Cast your care upon the Lord, and he will nourish you, and will never permit the righteous man to flounder" [Psalm 55:22]. For he takes care of us. [1 Peter 5:7] "He who dwells in the help of the Most High will abide in the protection of the God of heaven." [Psalm 91:1] "He who touches you touches the pupil of mine eye." [Zechariah 2:8] "I will be your shield" [Genesis 15:1], "a brazen wall" [Jeremiah 1:18; 15:20]; "I will contend with those who contend with you" [Isaiah 49:25]. "Even though a mother may forget her children, yet will I not forget you." [Isaiah 49:15]

Indeed, the principal purpose of Biblical history is to teach that the Lord watches over the ways of the saints with such great diligence that they do not even stumble over a stone [Psalm 91:12]. (1.17.6)

2. God's Providence in Prosperity

Gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future all necessarily follow upon this knowledge. Therefore whatever shall happen prosperously and according to the desire of his heart, God's servant will attribute wholly to God (1.17.7)

3. Certainty About God's Providence Helps Us in All Adversities

If anything adverse happens, straightway he will raise up his heart here also unto God, whose hand can best impress patience and peaceful moderation of mind upon us. If Joseph had stopped to dwell upon his brothers' treachery, he would never have been able to show a brotherly attitude toward them. But since he turned his thoughts to the Lord, forgetting the injustice, he inclined to gentleness and kindness, even to the point of comforting his brothers and saying: "It is not you who sold me into Egypt, but I was sent before you by God's will, that I might save your life" [Genesis 45:5, 7-8]. "Indeed you intended evil against me, but the Lord meant it for good." [Genesis 50:20] If Job had turned his attention to the Chaldeans, by whom he was troubled, he would immediately have been aroused to revenge; but because he at once recognized it as the Lord's work, he comforts himself with this most beautiful thought: "The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" [Job 1:21]. Thus David, assailed with threats and stones by Shimei, if he had fixed his eyes upon the man, would have encouraged his men to repay the injury; but because he knows that Shimei does not act without the Lord's prompting, he rather appeases them: "Let him alone," he says, "because the Lord has ordered him to curse" [2 Samuel 16:11] (1.17.8)

4. No Disregard for Intermediate Causes

Meanwhile, nevertheless, a godly man will not overlook the secondary causes. And indeed, he will not, just because he thinks those from whom he has received benefit are ministers of the divine goodness, pass them over, as if they had deserved no thanks for their human kindness; but from the bottom of his heart will feel himself beholden to them, willingly confess his obligation, and earnestly try as best he can to render thanks and as occasion presents itself. (1.17.9)

Thus Joab, though recognizing the outcome of the battle to be in God's hand, has yielded not to idleness, but diligently carries out the duties of his calling. To the Lord, moreover, he commits the determination of the outcome: "We will stand fast," says he, "for our people and the cities of our God; but let the Lord do what is good in his eyes" [2 Samuel 10:12]. This same knowledge will drive us to put off rashness and over-confidence, and will impel us continually to call upon God. (1.17.9)

5. Without Certainty About God's Providence Life Would Be Unbearable

Hence appears the immeasurable felicity of the godly mind. Innumerable are the evils that beset human life; innumerable, too, the deaths that threaten it. We need not go beyond ourselves: since our body is the receptacle of a thousand diseases — in fact holds within itself and fosters the causes of diseases — a man cannot go about unburdened by many forms of his own destruction, and without drawing out a life enveloped, as it were, with death. For what else would you call it, when he neither freezes nor sweats without danger? Now, wherever you turn, all things around you not only are hardly to be trusted but almost openly menace, and seem to threaten immediate death. Embark upon a ship, you are one step away from death. Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is imperiled. Go through the city streets, you are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs. If there is a weapon in your hand or a friend's, harm awaits. All the fierce animals you see are armed for your destruction. But if you try to shut yourself up in a walled garden, seemingly delightful, there a serpent sometimes lies hidden. Your house, continually in danger of fire, threatens in the daytime to impoverish you, at night even to collapse upon you. Your field, since it is exposed to hail, frost, drought, and other calamities, threatens you with barrenness, and hence, famine. I pass over poisonings, ambushes, robberies, open violence, which in part besiege us at home, in part dog us abroad. Amid these tribulations must not man be most miserable, since, but half alive in life, he weakly draws his anxious and languid breath, as if he had a sword perpetually hanging over his neck? (1.17.10)

C. Answers to Objectives

1. On God's "Repentance"
2. Scripture Speaks of God's "Repentance" to Make Allowance for Our Understanding
3. God Firmly Executes His Plan

III. How God Ordains Evil Without Being Guilty of It

[*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Chapter XVIII]

A. No Mere “Permission”

B. How Does God’s Impulse Comes to Pass in Men?

C. God’s Will is a Unity

D. Even When God Uses the Deeds of the Godless for His Purposes, He Does Not Suffer Reproach