

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the providence of God. Dr. Spencer, last time we made the point that it is both illogical and unbiblical to think that God can control major things if he doesn't control the details of life. How would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I would like to look at some Scriptures to strengthen and extend the scope of our argument that God providentially rules his universe.

Marc Roby: Very well, please proceed.

Dr. Spencer: There are many passages that tell us that God is in control of every aspect of our lives. Louis Berkhof gives a nice representative, but certainly not exhaustive, list in his *Systematic Theology*.¹ He gives eleven categories to illustrate God's providential control. His first category is sort of an umbrella that actually covers all of the others too, because he first points out that the Bible clearly teaches God's providential control over the universe at large, by which he means the physical creation and all of human history. To back up this claim he first cites Psalm 103:19, which says, "The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all."²

Marc Roby: That verse implicitly makes an important point. When we think of God's providence, we need to think of him ruling over his creation. He has a throne in heaven and a kingdom. And, as Psalm 19:1 tells us, all of creation declares his glory.

Dr. Spencer: I agree that's an important point. God is not an impersonal force, he is a person, the King of the universe. Berkhof also cites Ephesians 1:11, which says, "In him", referring to Jesus Christ, "we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will".

Marc Roby: And since this verse is speaking about God's plan of salvation, it is clear that when it says "everything" it is speaking about human history, both collectively and individually.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. This verse speaks about human history, so it's clear that Berkhof isn't just thinking about the inanimate creation. That's why I said this first category is a sort of umbrella. But, now let's move on to Berkhof's second category, which is God's providential control over the physical world. He cites Psalm 104:14, which says that God "makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate— bringing forth food from the earth". He also cites Job 37, where Job's friend Elihu is speaking about God and says, for example, in Verses 11-13, "He loads the clouds with moisture; he scatters his lightning through them. At his direction they

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938, pg. 168

² All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

swirl around over the face of the whole earth to do whatever he commands them. He brings the clouds to punish men, or to water his earth and show his love.”

Marc Roby: And that verse again illustrates that God’s providence is personal and has a purpose to achieve. I would also cite Job Chapter 38 to show God’s control of the physical world, where God himself peppers Job with a number of rhetorical questions regarding his creation and control of the world.

Dr. Spencer: That is a great chapter. And I would add that this in no way implies that there aren’t physical laws that govern our universe. God uses secondary agents to accomplish his purposes. There is a very interesting reference to the physical laws of our universe in the book of Jeremiah.

Marc Roby: It might be good to point out that Jeremiah prophesied to the people of Jerusalem before, during and after the Babylonians captured the city and took most of the prominent Jewish people away into captivity in Babylon between 605 and 587 BC.

Dr. Spencer: That does set the stage for his comment. As part of his prophecies, God told Jeremiah to encourage the people by telling them that their captivity was not the end of God’s work on their behalf. God was still in control and would, ultimately, restore the kingdom of Israel and bring the promised Messiah.

So, in Jeremiah 33:25 we read, “This is what the LORD says: ‘If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed laws of heaven and earth, then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his sons to rule over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them.’”

Marc Roby: That verse uses a very interesting literary device. Instead of using a simple “if A then B” sentence structure, God uses an “if not A then not B” structure. But then he emphasizes the certainty of B by giving an A that the listener knows without any doubt to be true. When God says “If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed laws of heaven and earth”, he assumes that the listener will immediately recognize that he *has*, in fact, established his covenant with the day and night and the fixed laws of heaven and earth and therefore, when he says “then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David”, the implication is clear; God will *not* reject the descendants of Jacob and David.

Dr. Spencer: That is a very interesting literary device. And it also serves to emphasize God’s providential control of creation via the secondary agent of fixed laws, because the statement assumes that it is obvious to all that there are fixed laws of heaven and earth.

This is the reason science works. God rules his universe in an orderly way. The law of gravity, for example, is the same now as it was 200 years ago, and we have every reason to believe that it will be the same 200 years from now. Therefore, we can perform experiments, make observations, put forth hypotheses about the nature of gravity and then confirm or deny and refine those hypotheses by further experiments. And that is how we have come to understand so much of the physical world. This verse gives us a good biblical basis for doing science.

Marc Roby: Of course, it does not logically follow that God himself is incapable of violating those fixed laws if and when he so chooses.

Dr. Spencer: Of course not. But, the vast majority of the time, they are fixed. And we have no power to alter them. Berkhof's third category notes that God's providence extends over all animals, which he calls the "brute creation". He cites Matthew 6:26, where Jesus tells us to, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them."

Marc Roby: We could again point out that there are secondary agents involved here. Plants have to grow and the animals themselves have to go and find the plants and eat them. It isn't that God comes down and puts the food into their mouths.

Dr. Spencer: It is important to constantly take note of God's use of secondary agents. There are very few things that God has done or continues to do by his own immediate action. In his fourth category, Berkhof notes God's providence over nations, citing, for example, Job 12:23, where we read that God "makes nations great, and destroys them; he enlarges nations, and disperses them."

Marc Roby: Another great example would be Cyrus, King of Persia. God told his people about this king and what he would do more than 100 years before Cyrus was born. For example, in Isaiah 45:13 we read, "I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free".

Dr. Spencer: Cyrus is an impressive example of God's providential control over the nations of this world. Berkhof's fifth category is God's providence over man's birth and lot in life and he cites Psalm 139:16 where we read that "your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

Marc Roby: And I would add Jeremiah 1:5 to this list, where God tells the prophet, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is another great example, and it isn't just the prophet Jeremiah that God knew before he was conceived. We read in Ephesians 2:10 that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." God has prepared work for each one of us in advance, and he can only do that if he has control over the details of our lives.

For his sixth category, Berkhof notes God's providence over the successes and failures of men and he cites Luke 1:52, where we are told that God "has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble."

Marc Roby: I would, again, want to add a verse to the list. We read concerning Joseph's time in an Egyptian prison in Genesis 39:23 that "The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did."

Dr. Spencer: And in Proverbs 21:31 we read that “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD.” There are many other verses we could cite as well, but it is clear that the Bible teaches us that all success comes from the Lord.

Berkhof’s seventh category is that God is sovereign over apparently accidental or unimportant events and he cites Proverbs 16:33 and Matthew 10:30, both of which we looked at in our previous session when we made the point that there are no chance events.

His eighth category is God’s providence in the protection of the righteous. The most important verse he cites there is Romans 8:28, which says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Marc Roby: That is a familiar and very comforting verse for Christians. It isn’t that all things are, in and of themselves, good, but that they all work together for good. But only for those who love God and have been called according to his purpose.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is an extremely comforting verse. God takes care of his children. And Berkhof’s ninth category is God’s providence in supplying the wants of God’s people. Now I must point out that he is using the word “want” in an old-fashioned sense here. He is really speaking of those things which we *need*. And to support this, he cites Philippians 4:19, where the apostle Paul told the believers in Philippi that “my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”

Marc Roby: And, of course, one of the most famous verses in the Bible is Psalm 23:1, which says, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.” Which is, again, speaking about things we need, not all of our earthly desires.

Dr. Spencer: We also read in Psalm 84:11, “For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.”

Marc Roby: And, amazingly, it isn’t just his chosen people that God cares about, Jesus himself commanded us in Matthew 5:44-45, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is incredible. Berkhof’s tenth category is God’s providence in answering prayer. And to illustrate that point I would cite one Old Testament verse and one New Testament verse.

Marc Roby: I’m going to guess that the Old Testament verse is 2 Chronicles 7:14, where God tells Solomon, “if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the verse I had in mind. And in the New Testament, I would cite Matthew 21:22, where Jesus tells us that “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” And then finally, Berkhof’s eleventh category is God’s providence in the exposure and punishment of the wicked.

Marc Roby: I'm surprised Berkhof doesn't also mention God's providence in the full and complete salvation of his chosen people.

Dr. Spencer: I am as well, so let's take the liberty of adding that ourselves. In Matthew 25:31-46 we read about the final destiny of all people. Jesus tells us in Verses 31-32 that "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." And then, in Verse 46 we read that those who have not trusted in Christ, "will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Marc Roby: And that verse shows us the end toward which God's providential control of this world is headed. There are only two possible eternal destinations, heaven or hell. We must see our need for a Savior, repent of our sins, and trust completely in Jesus Christ to be saved.

Dr. Spencer: That is the most important decision any human being makes, what will they say to God's glorious offer? The secular view of history is that it is not controlled by anyone and it has no ultimate purpose. We are just animals that live out our lives and then disappear from the scene. But that is *not* the truth, and God has given all of us more than enough information to know that it isn't truth.

Marc Roby: Which is why even people who don't claim any faith in God speak of people who die as being "in a better place" and things like that. They know the person still exists in some way.

Dr. Spencer: And that is also why people fear death so much. They know in their heart that they will be judged. And so, the biblical view of history takes into account the fact that history is linear. It had a beginning, it has an appointed end, and it has a purpose. In his book *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, James Boice notes that "There is probably no point at which the Christian doctrine of God comes more into conflict with contemporary world views than in the matter of God's providence."³ And he goes on to point out three things about the Christian view of providence. First, it is personal and moral.⁴ It is not like the secular view of fate or chance. There is a personal God who rules his creation and deals with us as moral creatures who can be justly held accountable for our actions.

Marc Roby: Yes, and even for our thoughts.

Dr. Spencer: You're quite right, we're told in Hebrews 4:12 that "the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." And God's word is a reflection of his character. It isn't just that his word judges in some abstract way, God himself will judge our thoughts and attitudes in a very concrete way on that day.

³ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 176

⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 180

Marc Roby: Which is obvious given the fact, for example, that Jesus told us in Matthew 5:28, “that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” In other words, we will be judged as having broken the commandment to not commit adultery.

Dr. Spencer: Very true. In addition to saying that providence is personal and moral, Boice makes two more points about the Christian view of providence. He says, secondly, that providence is specific. By which he means that God deals specifically with individual people in our different individual situations.

Marc Roby: Which goes along with providence being personal. What is the third point that Boice makes?

Dr. Spencer: That God’s providence has a purpose, it is directed toward a specific end.

Marc Roby: Which is why you said that history is linear.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And now that we’ve given an outline of the biblical data regarding God’s providence, and made some general comments about the nature and purpose of his providence, I think we are ready to dive in a bit deeper and look at the doctrine systematically.

Marc Roby: But, we are out of time for today, so I’d like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org and we’ll do our best to respond to them.