

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the providence of God. Dr. Spencer, we made the case in Session 88 that there are no chance events in this universe, God rules over every detail. And in our last Session, 89, we provided some of the Biblical data to support the case, showing that God controls every aspect of his physical creation and of human history. And we closed by noting that God's providence is personal and moral, that it deals with specific individuals, and that it has a purpose. But all of this raises an obvious question, which we have dealt with before, but I think it bears looking at again in light of God's providence. The question is this; if God controls every detail, what room is there for human freedom?

Dr. Spencer: Well, as you noted, we have dealt with this question before. In fact, we've discussed it twice; once in Session 65 when we examined God's sovereignty, and once in Session 86 when we discussed God's will. God's sovereignty, will and providence are, of course, closely related topics since God brings about his sovereign will through his works of creation and providence.

Marc Roby: Which is again an illustration of God's simplicity, that all of his attributes work together all of the time.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. In any event, the short answer to the question is that God can ordain every detail of human history without having to *force* us to do anything. In other words, he can control everything and still have us be really and truly free to make decisions for which we can be justly held accountable. The Bible does not tell us exactly how God does this, but as we noted in Session 65, unless we want to claim our own decisions are purely random, there is no logical contradiction.

Marc Roby: I remember that discussion, and as I said at the time, I certainly wouldn't want to claim that my decisions are random, and I don't think many others would either.

Dr. Spencer: Of course not. We may not always make our decisions in the best way possible, in fact, to be honest I should probably say that we often don't make decisions as carefully as we should. But, nevertheless, we do make decisions for reasons, and those reasons are based on our nature and all of the information available to us at the time, and all of our decisions are perfectly predictable by God since he knows us even better than we know ourselves.

Marc Roby: But, of course, predicting what we will do is not the same thing as controlling what we do.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, there is obviously a radical *conceptual* difference between predicting what I will do and controlling what I do. But, in practice, this may be a distinction without a difference. Consider the following facts. First, God knows exactly what I will do in any and every possible situation. Second, although God will never tempt me to sin, he can place thoughts in my mind, he can cause me to remember certain things I have seen or heard or thought about before, and he can directly control any aspect of my circumstances if he chooses to. Given those two facts, it is pretty obvious that he can bring about exactly what he wants to have happen without ever forcing me to do anything against my will.

So, without going into the topic in depth, suffice it to say that there is no contradiction between God's sovereignty and our freedom, and they are both clear teachings of Scripture.

Marc Roby: The Westminster Confession of Faith says it well. We quoted this passage in Session 65, but it is well worth repeating. In Paragraph 1 of Chapter 3 the confession says that "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."

Dr. Spencer: That is a wonderful statement and, most importantly, it is completely biblical. But now let's get back to specifically talking about God's providence. Theologians have often divided God's providence into three subtopics:¹ preservation, government and concurrence, which is sometimes called confluence,² concursus or cooperation.³ Others have used only the two topics of preservation and government, in which case concurrence is considered under the topic of government.⁴

Marc Roby: We already covered concurrence, which refers to God's will and our will both being operative in bringing about events, when we discussed God's will in Session 86.

Dr. Spencer: And that is why in our present discussion I plan to break providence down into two topics, preservation and government. It is interesting to note that these two topics are those given in the answer to Question 11 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which says that "God's works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions."

Marc Roby: That is a great short definition, well worth memorizing.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. So, let's begin, by looking at God's preservation in more detail. Wayne Grudem has a good definition of preservation, he writes that "God keeps all created things existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them."⁵

Marc Roby: And when the apostle Paul was speaking about God to the Athenians at the Areopagus, we read in Acts 17:28 that he said, "For in him we live and move and have our being."⁶ Grudem's definition completely agrees with this statement.

¹ E.g., Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 315

² R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Layman's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, P&R Publishing Co., 2006, Vol. 1, pg. 152

³ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 275

⁴ E.g., Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, pp 575-616

⁵ Grudem, op. cit., pg. 316

⁶ 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.™.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. The reality is that God upholds all of creation all of the time. Job's friend Elihu knew this. We read in Job 34:14-15 that he said about God, "If it were his intention and he withdrew his spirit and breath, all mankind would perish together and man would return to the dust." And we could add to Elihu's statement that the dust itself would disappear if God didn't uphold it.

Marc Roby: Yes, you're correct in that addition, a more comprehensive statement is found in Hebrews 1:3, where we are told that Jesus Christ "is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."

Dr. Spencer: That is, perhaps, the best verse to make this point. But it isn't the only verse. Another good one is Colossians 1:17, where the apostle said that Jesus Christ, "is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

The Bible clearly teaches that God upholds his creation. The whole of creation is completely dependent on him for its existence. He created it out of nothing, and if he ever ceased willing it to exist, it would disappear in an instant. But Grudem's definition goes even further than saying that God preserves the universe, it says that "God keeps all created things existing" and here comes the additional part, "and maintaining the properties with which he created them." In other words, things remain the same because God causes them to remain the same.

Marc Roby: And Grudem supports this contention, in part, by looking at the Greek for the verse I just read from Hebrews 1. Where our translation says that Christ is "sustaining all things by his powerful word" the Greek says, more literally, that he carries all things.

Dr. Spencer: And the Greek word used for carry in that verse is φέρω (pherō), which Grudem says, "has the sense of active, purposeful control over the thing being carried from one place to another."⁷ He also notes, as we have before, that the fact that God preserves all things provides the rational basis for science. We tend to take it for granted that the physical laws of our universe and the properties of materials stay the same from day to day, but why should they? We believe there is randomness in the quantum realm, why should there not also be randomness in the very laws that govern our universe?

Marc Roby: I don't think anyone can give a reason *why* things should remain the same if they don't believe in God. The best they can do is to simply argue that we believe they will remain the same in the future because they have in the past.

Dr. Spencer: I think that is the best anyone can say. And, of course, we can't entirely dismiss that reasoning, it is proper as far as it goes. But there is a deeper reason why things remain the same. The verses we've quoted, along with others, show that God sustains things. He is carrying all things along to a specific end. We should never forget the point we made at the end of our previous session, that God's providence is purposeful. He has a purpose for creation and he is guiding all things toward the fulfillment of that purpose.

⁷ Grudem, op. cit., pg. 316

Marc Roby: We see that in 2 Peter 3:5-7, where the apostle wrote about the great power of God's word and about the flood in Noah's time being a foreshadowing of God's final judgment. Peter wrote that people "deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men."

Dr. Spencer: That is a very clear teaching about the power of God and the fact that he has a plan for creation. We recently buried a woman in our church and, as always, the death of someone we know is a reminder to all of us that life is short. But death is not the end of life, it is just the end of life on this earth in this body. As our pastor likes to say, the important question is not whether she died, we will all die sooner or later. The important question is, where did she go?

Marc Roby: That is a sobering thought. God's providence has an end in view. And we have clear biblical support for the idea that God's providence includes his preserving, or sustaining, his creation.

Dr. Spencer: We certainly do. The theologian Charles Hodge went further and examined the nature of God's preservation. He pointed out that there have historically been three general views held about this topic. The first view he presents is basically the view of most deists. He describes this view as believing that God "created all things and determined that they should continue in being according to the laws which He impressed upon them at the beginning. There is no need, it is said, of supposing his continued intervention for their preservation. It is enough that He does not will that they should cease to be."⁸

Marc Roby: In other words, this view thinks of the world as a wind-up toy. God created it and set things in motion, but then backs up and watches without intervening in any way.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's right. The first objection that Hodge raises to this view is that it is opposed to the clear teaching of Bible. We've just read several verses that are simply incompatible with this idea.

Marc Roby: And that argument alone should be sufficient for any Christian.

Dr. Spencer: It should be, yes. But he also points out that this view, as he puts it, "does violence to the instinctive religious convictions of all men."⁹

Marc Roby: In other words, people often speak and act in ways that make it clear that they don't believe the universe is a big wind-up toy. Which is a point we made last time in discussing the sorts of things people say when a loved-one dies.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. The other views Hodge mentions are all types of what he calls continued creation. These views are certainly less common, especially today, and come in different forms, so I'm not going to examine them all or in any detail. Probably the most important one of them

⁸ Hodge, op. cit., Vol. 1, pg. 576

⁹ Ibid, pg. 577

says that since God cannot be described by a succession of acts, therefore you can't separate creation from providence. Another form of this view denies the reality of secondary agents altogether and says that God directly causes everything.

Marc Roby: Now that is a completely unbiblical view, and also not very appealing to logic and experience. It makes God the creator of evil and all of us just puppets.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. In fact, Hodge points out that it is indistinguishable from pantheism, it essentially makes God out to be the universe.¹⁰

Marc Roby: Which is certainly not a view to be taken seriously by anyone who has a meaningful conception of God, let alone by a Christian.

Dr. Spencer: No, we shouldn't take it seriously at all. If it were true, which it obviously isn't, we wouldn't be able to seriously consider it in any meaningful sense since we wouldn't really exist as independent sentient beings.

Marc Roby: Good point, the view is incompatible with true volitional creatures.

Dr. Spencer: That is why I will only consider the one form of continuous creation, which denies you can think about a succession of acts in God. This view allows for real secondary agents and attempts to deal with the fact that God is not subject to time in the same way we are. But it goes too far based on speculation and denies the clear teaching of the Bible. We can't understand how God views time, but it is clear that independent of the fact he is, in some sense, outside of both space and time, he nevertheless acts in his creation *in space and time*.

Hodge correctly says that "It is the height of presumption in man, on the mere ground of our speculative ideas, to depart from the plain representations of Scriptures".¹¹

Marc Roby: It is, admittedly, difficult to understand God's relation to time as we experience it.

Dr. Spencer: It is, but there is a good analogy presented by Wayne Grudem, which may help to understand this point.

Marc Roby: What analogy is that?

Dr. Spencer: It is the analogy of a human author writing a story. Grudem uses this to help understand the idea of concurrence, the fact that the free-will actions of secondary agents can work together with God's will to produce his desired outcome.¹² The idea is simple. If you are writing a fictional story, you know all that is going to happen to your characters in the future and you weave the story together to produce the end that you have chosen. But, if you are a good author, you also make sure that your characters do and say things that are appropriate and fitting for their given natures and knowledge of events at any given moment of time. In other words,

¹⁰ Ibid, pg. 580

¹¹ Ibid, pp 578-579

¹² Grudem, pp 321-322

you, as the author, experience time – in the sense of the story – completely differently than your characters do.

Marc Roby: That is a useful analogy, although very limited given the fact that God has created real people, not just characters in a story.

Dr. Spencer: Obviously God is infinitely greater than we are, but the analogy is useful nonetheless. And with that, we have said all I want to say for now about preservation, and we are ready to move on to discuss God's government.

Marc Roby: And that makes this a perfect place to end 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.