

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the providence of God. The answer to Question 11 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism says that “God’s works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.” We finished examining God’s preservation of his creation last time and will discuss his government today. Dr. Spencer, how would like to begin?

Dr. Spencer: Let’s begin with a definition. Wayne Grudem makes the following statement about God’s government: “God has a purpose in all that he does in the world and he providentially governs or directs all things in order that they accomplish his purposes.”¹ In other words, God has a plan for creation and he controls all things in accordance with that plan.

We read in Ephesians 1:9-12 that God the Father, “made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. In him 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, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.”²

Marc Roby: That is a magnificent passage that not only speaks about God’s plan, and that everything is done in conformity with the purpose of his will, but also that his purpose is the praise of his glory.

Dr. Spencer: That is why I quoted all the way through Verse 12, I wanted to show that God’s plan for creation has an ultimate purpose and, as we have discussed before, that purpose is the manifestation of his own glory. John Frame makes an interesting point in his book *The Doctrine of God*, he points out that our English word “govern” comes from a Latin word, which means “to steer a ship”.³ To govern properly one has to have an objective in mind, a place or situation to which you want to lead.

Marc Roby: And, of course, many of the troubles in our day and age come about because of radically different views about the direction in which our government is leading the country.

Dr. Spencer: Well, you’re certainly right about that, and the same problem exists in many other countries as well. But when it comes to the ultimate goal of creation, there is no debate. God does not govern this universe in a democratic way. God rules as the absolute sovereign over all creation and there is no debate, compromise or negotiation allowed or possible.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 331

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.™.

³ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 276

Marc Roby: And we should praise God that there isn't, since he alone is perfect and his plan is certainly better than anything men could come up with. But the fact that God rules with absolute power is something most human beings really don't like.

Dr. Spencer: In fact, no one likes it unless God has graciously changed his heart. In our natural state we all think we could do a better job of ruling the universe, in spite of abundant evidence to the contrary. But only God is perfectly good and omniscient. He knows the best possible goal and the best possible means of attaining that goal. We just need to trust and obey as the children's song says.

Marc Roby: Which sounds very simple, but is, in fact, very difficult at times. Especially when we experience the pain and suffering brought about by the presence of evil.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it can be hard. And the Bible deals with this very honestly. We see many places where people struggle to understand why God allows some things to happen. A very common theme is for people to wonder why God allows the wicked to prosper, rather than judging them immediately. For example, in Job 21:7, we read Job asking, "Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power?" And in Chapter 24, Verse 1 he asks, "Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment? Why must those who know him look in vain for such days?"

Marc Roby: And we see similar questions being asked many times in the psalms. I think, for example, of Psalm 10, which begins with the psalmist crying out, "Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Psalm 10:1) And then goes on to describe the pride and success of the wicked.

Dr. Spencer: But it ends with the psalmist declaring that God does, in fact, see and know what is going on and will call the wicked to account. In Verse 16 the psalmist says, "The LORD is King for ever and ever; the nations will perish from his land." The trouble from our perspective is, of course, that we don't always see those who oppose God being punished and those who trust him being rewarded. We have to trust God's promises and realize that this life is not all there is.

Marc Roby: In other words, we need to live by faith as we are told in Habakkuk 2:4, which is quoted several times in the New Testament.⁴

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly what we need to do. When we are troubled, we need to preach a sermon to our own soul based on God's past works and his promises. In Psalms 42 and 43 the psalmist preaches to his own soul three times, saying, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." (Psalm 42:5-6, 11, 43:5) It is only when we take time to consider who God is, what he has done and what he has promised that we can calm the doubts and fears that all of us have at one time or another.

⁴ See Romans 1:17, 2 Corinthians 5:7, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38.

Marc Roby: King David wrote, in Psalm 62:1-2, “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.” David knew that God was the one in charge and that his only true hope and comfort were to be found in God and his perfect providence. The fact that God governs every detail of his creation should give us great encouragement as well.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it should. And thank you for bringing us back to our topic of God’s government. At the beginning of this session you read the answer to Question 11 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which states that “God’s works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.”

We can combine that answer with the point we have made about God having a purpose for creation and we can say that God governs all of his creatures and all of their actions with holiness, wisdom and power to achieve his perfect purpose.

Marc Roby: Which, as you noted, is the manifestation of his glory. I can’t wait to get to heaven and live under that perfect government.

Dr. Spencer: Nor can I. No earthly government can even come close, although they are all under God’s government. The theologian Charles Hodge notes that “The idea that God would create this vast universe teeming with life in all its forms, and exercise no control over it, to secure it from destruction or from working out nothing but evil, is utterly inconsistent with the nature of God. And to suppose that anything is too great to be comprehended in his control, or anything so minute as to escape his notice; or that the infinitude of particulars can distract his attention, is to forget that God is infinite.”⁵

Marc Roby: He makes a great point. To believe that there is a God who created this universe and then simply backs off and watches to see what will happen is unreasonable. If there is a being powerful enough to create this universe, and who cares enough to do so, it is inconceivable that he wouldn’t care what happens in it or be able to control all details to bring about his desired end.

Dr. Spencer: And if someone can conceive of such a monstrous God, it is not the God who has revealed himself in the Bible, it is a figment of the imagination.

Marc Roby: Such a God would be a monstrosity. He would be like some earthy fathers who produce children but then abandon them.

Dr. Spencer: I’m glad that you mentioned fathers because that provides a perfect segue to what I want to look at next. God is our heavenly Father and he cares for his children. It necessarily follows that he will govern his creation to achieve his desired end. The Heidelberg Catechism does a great job of describing this. Question 27 asks “What do you mean by the providence of God?” and the answer is, “The almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He still upholds heaven, earth, and all creatures, and so governs them that

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. 1, pg. 583

herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance but be His fatherly hand.”⁶

Marc Roby: I like that answer a lot. God upholds, or preserves, his creation as we discussed last time and he also governs his creation as a perfect, loving father. Even the trials and difficulties of life are designed for the good of God’s children. We read in Romans 8:28, “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.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a very important verse. We’ve used it a number of times, and I would strongly suggest that all Christians memorize it. We don’t always see how things will work together for our good, but we trust God that they will. He governs every detail of life. The Heidelberg Catechism answer mentions rain and drought as one example.

Now, our modern society ignores the fact that God is in control of these things. He uses secondary agents of course, so we can develop, for example, an understanding of the physical laws and processes that govern our weather and we can, within limits, predict the weather, but we can’t divorce the blessing of rain or the curse of drought from God’s overall control.

In Deuteronomy Chapter 28 God outlines the blessings he provides for obedience and the curses that come for disobedience. The chapter begins, in Verse 1, by saying, “If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today”, and then he lists a number of blessings we will receive as a result. In Verse 12 we are told that one of the blessings is, “The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands.”

Marc Roby: And, on the other hand, in Verse 15 we are told, “However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you”, and then in Verse 24 we again read about rain, it says one curse is that “The LORD will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder; it will come down from the skies until you are destroyed.”

Dr. Spencer: That is frightening, and it is meant to be. God will not long bless or even put up with the nation that continues to defy his law and blaspheme his name. Which is an aspect of his governing his creation.

Marc Roby: And, of course, God’s government extends far beyond the weather. The Catechism also mentions health and sickness, which immediately makes me think of the church in Corinth, where the apostle Paul warned them about their improper use of the Lord’s supper and told them, in 1 Corinthians 11:30, “That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.”

⁶ G.I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1993, pg. 48

Dr. Spencer: That is a great example. And falling asleep is, of course, a euphemism for death. Paul was telling them that God was judging them with weakness, sickness and death because they were not being careful in their worship.

Marc Roby: And this is in the New Testament! Many professing Christians seem to have the mistaken idea that God somehow mellowed out between the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Old Testament God killed Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, with fire for their improper worship, and we see that he does the same thing in the New Testament.

Dr. Spencer: That's a good point. God does not change and his purpose does not change. We do live in a different administration, or you could say dispensation, of God's kingdom now, but his requirement for holiness and propriety in worship is the same.

Marc Roby: I'd be careful with using that word dispensation.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. We certainly do not mean to lend any support to the view commonly called dispensationalism, which includes the idea that people are saved in different ways in the different dispensations; that idea is completely unbiblical. But there is a proper use of the term. God's commands are not all of the same type. Some of them are based on God's nature and cannot be changed. For example, the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments. It has always been wrong, and always will be wrong, to murder, commit adultery, steal and so on. But there are other commands of God, sometimes called positive commands, that are, in a sense, arbitrary.⁷

Marc Roby: Like not eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. There is no reason to assume that there was anything inherently bad about that tree, the only reason it was wrong to eat of it was that God had commanded Adam not to. Or the dietary laws of the Old Testament, there is nothing inherently wrong about eating pork, or God wouldn't allow it now. It was again only wrong in the Old Testament time because God had commanded his people not to do so. He has that right. But commands like that are not based on his nature and he is free to change them if he so chooses. We are clearly told in the New Testament that he has abrogated the dietary and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament.

Marc Roby: All of those laws, especially the sacrificial system, served the purpose of pointing forward to Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And in God's government of his creation those laws were cancelled when Christ came. Paul compares this to a minor child coming of age in Galatians Chapters 3 and 4. Let me quote Galatians 3:24-26 from the English Standard Version of the Bible because it translates the passage more literally. It says, "So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith."

⁷ Joel Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2012, pg. 657

Marc Roby: That's a very interesting passage.

Dr. Spencer: It is, and we may spend some time on it later, but I want to stick to the topic of God's government for the moment, so all I want to point out from this passage now is that even though God doesn't change, his means of governing his creation can. This is no different than a parent treating a child differently as the child grows up. The parent hasn't changed if the child's bedtime is 8 PM when she is in 3rd grade and then 10 PM when she is in high school.

Marc Roby: Yes, that's a good point.

Dr. Spencer: In fact, we would expect there to be changes in the way God governs his creation in order to bring about his perfect plan. Adam and Eve had a very different relationship with God prior to the fall than they did after the fall. And God's people have a very different relationship to him now than they did before Christ came. And our relationship will again be different when Christ comes again. But through it all, God does not change. He is governing all things so that they reach their appointed end. As Grudem said in the definition we read at the beginning, God "providentially governs or directs all things in order that they accomplish his purposes."

Marc Roby: And his purposes are extremely gracious and beneficial for his people.

Dr. Spencer: They most certainly are. But we must remember that blessings come from obedience, and curses from disobedience, even in this dispensation. We are to use the means God has given us, such as our minds, labor and natural resources, to fulfil the commands he has given. But we should never use these means without reference to God's decrees about how they should be used. Joel Beeke and Mark Jones in their book *A Puritan Theology*, tell us that "Stephen Charnock warned that pride uses means without seeking God, and presumption depends on God while neglecting the means God provides."⁸

Marc Roby: That's a great quote. And a good place to end for today, so let me 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.

⁸ Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2012, pg. 170