

## Providence of God

The Heidelberg Catechism speaks of the providence of God in Lord's Day 10, and in so doing says that "all things come to us, not by chance, but from God's fatherly hand." Over the past few weeks I have heard this quoted several times, and each time I have become a little troubled. I have become troubled because the one quoting this was speaking about some adversity that they had experienced, and it seemed to me that they believed that God had sent them that adversity, indicating that it appeared he was its cause. This is problematic because God does not cause evil nor is he the source of anything that is evil. While Lord's Day 9 says that God sends us adversity, we must read that statement in its context, and when we do, we discover that the act of "sending" may not be the same as the act of causing.

Zacharias Ursinus was one of the co-authors of the catechism, and he also wrote a commentary on it. In that commentary he gives a bit of background into why he and his fellow author decided to include these statements in the catechism. He says that outside the teaching of God's providence there are three basic explanations as to why things happen as they do: First, some people believe that the only reason things happen is because of cause and effect limited entirely to this world. Human beings are the cause of most things (although a grizzly attack is also a cause), and what we cause (do) has an effect (result). In this view, God does not involve himself in history. This appears to be the most common view held by people today who believe strongly that we can change our destinies, and we can do so without God's intervention.

A second view says that built into the very fabric of this world is something we might call fate. Fate is a kind of force that pushes the events of history in a certain direction, and none can resist that force. Even God cannot resist this powerful force, and those who believe in fate are fatalistic, saying that there is nothing that can be done. We simply have to live with what we get.

A third view says that God doesn't really direct how things happen in this world, but from time to time, he reaches down into the world to shake things up a bit. In this view, God doesn't move things in a specific direction, but he does add energy to the system so that it keeps going. Human beings are responsible for their own destinies, and we must deal with things as they come our way. I don't know anyone who holds this view, although there may be some who do.

In thinking of these three views, Ursinus found that they didn't correlate with the teachings of Scripture. Rather, he thought that the word, "providence," might be a better way of describing why things happen as they do. (It wasn't Ursinus who developed this idea, but he thought it necessary to include in the catechism to answer some of the teachings of his day and ours.) He defined providence in this way: *Providence is the eternal, most free, unchangeable, wise, just and good counsel of God, according to which he effects all good things in his creatures; permits also evil things to be done, and directs all, both good and evil, to his own glory and the salvation of his people.*

Notice that Ursinus identifies two kinds of events in this world: good and bad. Relying on Scripture, he says that all the good things that happen in this world can be attributed to God. Not all things are directly attributed to God, for there is some human agency involved. Yet, the very fact that a mother loves her

---

children or a scientist makes a discovery are the result of God building these good things into the world. Ultimately, we can trace all good things back to the nature of creation or God's intervention in it after he created it. All good things come from God.

But evil or bad things do not come from God. They come from the fact that sin has entered into this world and things are not as they should be. There should be no cancer, and there should be no drug-fueled crime. There should be no car accidents, and there should be no divorce. These things happen because of sin. We must be careful not to attribute them to God. Rather, as Ursinus points out, God, while not causing them, permits them. This is an important distinction.

If it were true that God literally sent difficulty and adversity into our lives, we would have to say that God is more like a cruel dictator than a loving Father. At the same time (and this is something that often tries our faith), God permits evil things to happen. In his infinite wisdom (something we cannot understand), God allows cancer and crime and broken relationships. While they should not be, they are, and God has decided not to stop them, at least not yet. In the future, of course, God will rid his creation of sin, and evil things will no longer occur. We may never understand why God allows bad things to happen, but we have to trust that he knows what he is doing.

The final statement that Ursinus makes, however, is the most important: God direct both good and evil to his own glory and to the salvation of his people. Certainly, we can say that easily about the good things that he causes to happen, either directly or indirectly. It takes an act of faith, however, to trust that God can turn evil things, things that are a result of sin permeating this world, for his glory and for our salvation. And this is what is truly amazing about the sovereignty of God: unlike us who are often helpless in the face of evil, God can take that which is evil and somehow make good come from it. And he does that regularly and often. It is the devil's design to use adversity to drive us away from God, but God often brings people closer to himself through times of adversity. I cite two examples: first, it is evident that when the church of Jesus Christ experiences persecution, it tends to become more faithful and often grows more rapidly. We saw that happening in China in the height of communist rule when the church grew remarkably. I cite a personal example as well: in 1977 my mother was involved in a tractor accident which resulted in her losing her unborn child and being hospitalized for half a year. It was a difficult time for her and my father, but God used those difficulties to cause my parents to grow in their faith. Especially in my mother I sensed a renewed sense of calling to serve the Lord, and she did so faithfully for the decades God gave to her after the accident, becoming a faithful leader in a variety of ministries in the church and a witness to the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ to her neighbours.

God's providence is astounding, for in this providence we see his sovereignty. But let's be careful, as Ursinus was, to understand that only that which is good comes from God's fatherly hand. We can also be thankful that when living in a sinful world causes adversity, God is powerful enough to work through it and turn it to our good. And we can be thankful for a God who does intervene in this world, rather than being subject to fate or dependent on our own abilities. Our message to the world is this: we have a God who provides good things and helps us when things aren't good. That is true for now and for eternity.

*Pastor Gary*