

## THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD - STUDY ONE

*God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness and mercy.*

- From The Westminster Confession Of Faith

**27 Q. WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND BY THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD?**

**A.** *Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which He upholds as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty - all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand.*

**Q. HOW DOES THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S CREATION AND PROVIDENCE HELP US?**

**A.** *We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing will separate us from His love. All creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they can neither move nor be moved.*

- From The Heidelberg Catechism.

## INTRODUCTION

We live in difficult times, and none of us know what the next year will be like. 2020 has already been vastly different to how any of us would have imagined it would be like. Everything feels like it is uncertain, and this can easily fuel anxiety and stress - especially if we spend our time listening to the news and media commentary.

As God's people, we can see things differently. Not that we don't have understandable concerns about life (Jesus assumes we will when he calls us "not to worry about our life"), but rather we know that the Bible shows us that the Lord is in control over absolutely everything.

In previous generations, this was a truth that was regularly preached and meditated on. The doctrine of providence is expanded on in the great creeds and confessions of the church (see above for examples).

It is perhaps a sign of the fact that our life has been relatively easy that our generation has replaced that concern with an obsession with guidance about the future - just compare the numbers of books published about those two topics over the years to see the difference.

For the next few weeks I thought it would be helpful to do some doctrinal studies on the providence of God. Obviously I hope we will learn what the Bible teaches on this, but my aim is pastoral. If we as a church are gripped by the fact that, as Melvin Tinker helpfully puts it, *“God our heavenly Father is working in and through all things by his wisdom and power for the good of his people and the glory of his name”* (in “Intended For Good”) then we will praise him, trust him, and obey him in all things - even if we can’t precisely see how this may be the case right here and right now.

## **NOTES FOR STUDY ONE - PSALM 135**

This is an introductory study, introducing the fact that the Lord reigns over everything for his own glory, the good of his people, and knowing this should lead to praise from us. There were many passages I could have chosen but I’ve gone for Psalm 135. A sign that this is such a rich theme in Scripture is the fact that *“almost every verse of this Psalm is close to, or identical to other verses in the Psalms, the Pentateuch, or the prophets.”* (Christopher Ash - Teaching Psalms).

Rather than immediately jumping into the Psalm, spend a bit of time introducing the subject of Providence. You might want to read one of the definitions aloud from one of the Confessions of Faith (see above). Ask the group whether they have considered God’s providence before and what they think about it. Sometimes people can gravitate more towards the idea that God is in charge of the big picture of life and the universe, whereas others may gravitate towards knowing that God is in charge of the details of their life - and if folk do that they may not have considered that both things are true. It’s also an opportunity for people to raise questions (such as “how does this fit in with the fact that humans have a will?”) Don’t answer those questions - just let them be aired. We will come back to them as the series goes on.

Importantly ask “how does providence make you feel?” It should be the most comforting doctrine. However, right now, given the upheavals and uncertainties, allow people to express their nervousness.

The Psalm itself is straightforward. The opening and closing verses call God’s people to “praise the LORD” (remember LORD written like that is referring to the fact that God is Israel’s covenant Lord - it’s pointing to the covenant promises and unique relationship God’s people have with him).

It is striking that believers are called to praise the name of the LORD (his character), to remember he is good, to remember that his character is pleasant/good. As we look at our world and look back over the Lord's dealings with us and our world, our response must be to praise him rather than to worry or be anxious.

The focus of the Psalm is verse 4. The LORD has chosen his people to belong to him (vs 4). Ultimately everything he does is for his own glory. But his glory is bound up with rescuing a people to belong to him, so much so that it can be said that everything he does in the world is to achieve that purpose. Providence is not simply God working to a vague plan we have no access to. It is God achieving his purposes to glorify Christ and save his people.

The providence of God in achieving his purposes is seen in the way he rules the create world (vs 5-7) and the way he has carried out his will amongst the nations (vs 8-11 - all significant events in the exodus and establishment of the people in the land. Vs 11 is referring to some of the first defeats of the enemies who were in Canaan. See Numbers 21.)

Again, verses 13 and 14 show that God has acted to show his greatness and to vindicate his people. No other "god" that other people trust in has done this! (Vs 5). It is foolish to trust in anything else - no one else can rule creation or direct history to achieve his will and love and save a people. Other gods are dumb, blind, deaf and lifeless.

The big question is - if we don't believe God is in charge and fulfilling his purpose, then who else is? If the providence of God is not true, then what is the alternative? We can trust in an enlightened progress that we as human beings are achieving - but is that really true? What are the "gods" we are trusting in? And how can it be shown that those gods are really lifeless? It's quite easy to show that - just think about the trust in (for example) scientific progress (how little do we really know?), or economic theories (which did not predict the 2008 crash).

As we read this Psalm we can and should praise the Lord. The history recounted is our history - but as we are further on we can add to it can't we? We don't just look back to the passover, we can look back to the greater Passover - the cross. We can rejoice in the victories God gave over the kings in Canaan, but even more so over the greater forces of evil and wickedness who opposed Christ and his church.

Although right now we may worry, we have no reason not to praise the Lord. He is still at work for his names sake and to vindicate his people!

## POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What comes into your mind when you hear the word “providence”? What do you believe about God’s control over the world and your life? Do you find it easier to believe in the big picture of God’s rule, or the details? How does this make you feel?

Look at verses 1-3. Who is called to praise? What/who are they to praise? Why are they to praise?

Do you find it strange that the “servants of the LORD” are called to “praise the name of the LORD”? Why might they (we) not do that?

What is the focus of the LORD’s work (vs 4)? What does that tell us about his priorities? How does that help us as we begin to think about his providential rule?

Why is the LORD different to every other so called god? (Vs 5-7). How and why does he rule over the created world?

How has he acted in history? (Vs 8-12). Why did he bring down those human powers?

Why has the LORD done this? (vs 13-14)

Why is it so stupid to trust in anything else (vs 15-18)?

Look again at verses 1-3, and then verses 19-21. What should be our first, and main response to all we see in this Psalm?

The challenge of vs 19 and 20 is - if we are God’s people, we should fear God and praise him. Why might we struggle to do that, as we look back over history, our lives or even around at what is happening today.

How does this Psalm help us to turn our fears and struggles into praise?