

## Providence (4): The Comfort of Providence

In his fine essay on the providence of God, Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield mentions the frequent saying of a certain woman familiar to him. That housewife was fond of saying, “We will not be robbed of God’s providence.” That quotation and its source are instructive for the consideration of the doctrine of providence, especially that doctrine’s comfort to the believer.

First, the quotation makes very real the threat to the church’s and the believer’s confession of the doctrine of providence. The threat to the doctrine is old. It was present among the Israelites already in the wilderness when they tempted God with the question whether he was among them or not. Today especially the crisis in the doctrine of providence becomes acute because many new threats to the doctrine have arisen. There is open theism, which teaches that God is open to the inputs of man in his government of the world. There is process theology, which teaches not an immutable God, but an idol that develops with the world. There is also reassertion of Arminianism, which is the mother of those gross heresies and denies providence by teaching that God is dependent on the will of the sinner in salvation, a blatant denial of God’s sovereignty over all things. This makes no mention of the serious attack on the doctrine of providence that is leveled by the acceptance of evolutionary theory in nearly all North American Reformed denominations. Evolutionism necessarily denies providence because it enthrones chance, providence’s mortal enemy, on the throne of the universe as the explanation of the appearance of the species.

The doctrine of providence today then is worthy of a fresh defense because there are forces that would rob the church of providence. If you and I are spiritually sensitive to these attacks and the threat they pose to the Christian doctrine of providence, our conviction must likewise be, “We will not be robbed of God’s providence.”

Second, when that farmer’s wife said, “We will not be robbed of God’s providence,” she revealed her conviction and the conviction of the Reformed faith that the doctrine of providence is a precious possession. For believers to have the doctrine taken from them is to have taken from them a precious possession. Providence is a possession of the Reformed and Christian faith because it is revealed in scripture. It is a *precious* possession because it is the source of rock-solid comfort in the church’s and believers’ tribulations. In their confession of providence, believers rests in the God and Father of Jesus Christ their Lord who with a gracious regard for

them rules over the world, and over every detail of their lives, especially the evil events. To lose the doctrine is to lose that confession, and to lose that confession is to be thrown back into the hopelessness of unbelief, as the apostle describes the condition of the unregenerated man and the believer by nature: “Ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh...ye were without...hope, and without Christ in the world” (Eph. 2: 11–12). If to have your possessions taken away is robbery, to have this aspect of the faith, which is the source of such comfort, taken away is the worst robbery. Theologians and ministers who take the doctrine away are thieves who break through and steal one of the most precious possessions of the believer in this life.

Third, that quotation is revealing because it was the confession of a housewife. There are hundreds of books on providence. Many of them consist of scholarly debate, mostly friendly, between philosophers who are loosely connected to the church, do little or no preaching, and serve in institutions of higher learning that are loosely connected to the church. There in the ivory tower debates are held and books are written. There are notable exceptions.

But the doctrine of providence is the possession of the church and of the believer. It is not the possession of dry theologians who can debate endlessly about the relationship between causes and God, or God and evil, like the medieval ones debated about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. It is not the possession of philosophers who debate *ad nauseum* whether there is such a thing as providence at all, or who do all in their power to mitigate it, deny it, or overthrow it, and with that to rob the church.

Providence is not the possession of those who are earthly and carnal, isolated from the sufferings of the world, are blissfully unaware of pain, or who in that pain merely acquiesce like grim stoics. But providence is the possession of believers who live in the midst of a valley of tears, in the midst of death, suffering, and sorrow, but who confess God’s sovereignty for good and that all things come not by chance, but by God’s fatherly hand.

They are believers who in their daily lives, whether as mothers or bricklayers, as housewives or truck drivers, have crying children and very sick loved ones, who experience death and loss and grief of spirit and anguish of soul for the straying loved one. Those believers stand in such troubles, sorrows, and tribulations, and with uplifted head look to their God and Father who now rules over all things in Jesus Christ for their good and salvation. Because of the truth of providence they confess in that sorrow that all things work together for good to them who love God and are called according to his purpose.

If we know in the midst of our trials the severe temptation to doubt God's goodness, then let us have the same conviction of that housewife who gripped the princely theologian, so that we say with her and the church of all ages, "We will not be robbed of God's providence."

The doctrine of providence in the language of the Belgic Confession in article 13 "affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father, who watches over us with a paternal care."

The comfort is for the believer. It comforts the believer with God: his power over against my weakness and frailty; his greatness over against my puniness; his steadfastness over against all the vicissitudes of this life; his good will over against great evil.

The comfort of providence for the believer is not a vague, warm, or fuzzy feeling. The comfort of providence is not that I will have no trouble in this world. The comfort is that in Jesus Christ the God of providence is my God and my Father and is favorable to me in the world in all things, just as surely as he stands against the wicked and gives no peace to them in all things.

That comfort means that as the believer stands in the world that is exceeding sorrowful and sinful and in which he suffers much misery, over against all the evil, sorrow, misery and suffering of the world and of himself individually, by faith he posits the truth, I belong to Jesus Christ and my Father is in absolute control of all things, from the death of my child to the falling of a hair from my head to the violent, cruel, and deadly opposition of the wicked.

That comfort means that I stand in that world and this side of the grave and confess on the ground that he is my God and my Father that he is working this and all things for my good, for the good of his elect church, and for the glory of Jesus Christ and his own name, so that on the basis of this confession I am assured that nothing can be against me, and that these present sufferings work for me a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

For the believer then the doctrine of providence is in this sin-cursed and miserable world of unspeakable consolation, good news for the afflicted, and the promise of a new day that will dawn in the coming of Jesus Christ from heaven.

Because of the sanctifying power of faith in providence I am able to be thankful in prosperity and patient in adversity.

Confessing providence, I am thankful in prosperity. In prosperity it is only the faith that I receive all these things from the hand of my Father that also makes me serve him and not things.

Confessing providence, I am patient in adversity. Faith in the doctrine of providence silences my rebellious heart and lips. I acquiesce to his will. I endure it. That is patience. I submit to it and begin to will it and to glory in tribulations, also knowing that God works all things for good to those who love him and are the called according to his purpose.

It is comfort in providence that in the midst of evil I sing as the farmer—or maybe his wife too—in Habakkuk 3:17–18: “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.”

There you see vividly demonstrated a believer who will not be robbed of God’s providence. He sang not as a stoic for whom life and death were the same, for whom suffering and prosperity were the same. He did not sing as some untried and naive man. He was definitely aware of suffering; he was intensely aware of it; like Job he was in the midst of it.

He sang because like Job he was also intensely aware of who did this: he did not say the devil did it, the weather did it, or the world did it. He did not say either that God did it and then blaspheme his name. He said, “The Lord gave and the Lord took away, blessed be the name of the Lord.” He sang, “God is king forever, let the nations tremble.” He sang of a hope that is reserved in heaven for him, of a city that hath foundations, and of a newborn world.

He sang because this was all the work of his heavenly Father and the God of his salvation who gave him Jesus Christ, and with Christ turns all things to his profit. He would not be robbed of God’s providence because it was the source of unspeakable consolation to him. Let us confess it and so be comforted in that confession.