

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament

F. The Creator-Creature Distinction

16. The Sovereignty and Providence of God

The first part of this course has focused on giving an overview of the redemptive historical story leading up to Jesus' incarnation. Now, in the second part of this course, let's consider some of the recurring biblical themes found in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Some of the most important of these have to do with the distinction between Creator and creature.

Let's start with the Old Testament's attestation to the sovereignty and providence of God. God's sovereignty is affirmed at the very beginning of the Bible with these words: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* There is no attempt to prove that God existed prior to his creation, or argue for that truth; it is simply stated, and assumed throughout the Scriptures. First there was God; then there was his creation.

It is manifestly clear that the Creator must be greater than any part of his creation. He transcends it and exists independently of it. King Solomon of ancient Israel understood this very well. Although he built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem as a place for God to meet with his people, he also knew that this temple was not God's true home (1 Kings 8:27): *But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!*

Solomon realized what the Bible repeatedly proclaims: Although God chooses to be present and active in his creation, he is not confined to it.

- God is not bound by time. Isa. 57:15 calls him the one who lives forever; Psalm 90:2 confesses: *"From everlasting to everlasting you are God."* God has always existed and will always exist. He can take all of human history in with a glance – every moment, every life every day.
- God is not bound by space. (Ps. 139:7-8 asks this rhetorical question: *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? [Nowhere, of course.] If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*
- God is not subject to changing circumstances (1 Sam. 15:29. - *He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.*
- God is never taken by surprise; he knows everything. Ps. 139:2 puts it like this: *You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.* He sees it all, and he knows it all.

To sum it up, God is All-Sufficient in himself. He needs neither permission nor help to do what he wants. As much God loves us, he does not need us. He did not need to create us because he was lonely or lacking in some way. Nor does he choose to use us because he can't get things done without us. He is not limited in any way. Here's the truth: God can do anything he wants: he is almighty. Ps 147:4-5 says, *He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.* Fifty-six times the Bible says that God is the Almighty One. He is in control. And he has been since before the creation of the world.

Among other things that means that creation is not a product of blind chance but the result of a purposeful act of the Creator. To be sure, we have limited knowledge of God's purposes. Intestinal parasites and mosquitoes, for example, may be essential to our world, but if so, we know little of why or how. But we do know a little of God's ultimate purpose for his creation. It reveals something of what God is like and stands as a testament to his majesty and glory.

Ps 104:2 says, *He wraps himself in light as with a garment.* As long as the sun, moon, and stars have been shining, besides helping us to see other parts of God's handiwork, they bear witness in themselves to what God has done. Ps. 104 continues, *He stretches out the heavens like a tent and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters. He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind. He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants.*

There is no spot in the universe which does not in some way reflect the glory of God. Indeed, the whole universe is a sort of mirror which helps us to see the invisible God (cf. Heb 11:3). The whole creation speaks a language, to use the imagery of Ps 19, that is heard in every part of the world.

Of course, anyone who studies the details of the natural and physical sciences, sciences like biology, astronomy, physics, etc. cannot fail to be amazed at the order and beauty within the parts of the creation they study. But, even the unschooled can see a lot of God's excellent work all around them.

And some of the very best testimony to God's excellent work is given by the design and functioning of human beings. Even babies, who can't even speak words of praise to God, yet, by their very existence, give a testimony strong enough to silence God's opponents. Ps 8:2 *From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.* cf Calvin I,v

There have been, and will continue to be, many attempts to rob the Creator God of the honor due him, but the Creation stands as a living monument to God's power and goodness.

Another way to speak of the sovereignty of God and the realm over which he rules is by use of the words "king" and "kingdom." God is king in this world, not like the other kings of various eras and places, who exercised control for a time and over certain regions of the world, but the supreme king for all time and for eternity, to whom all other kings and kingdoms are subject.

The battle between God and the mighty Pharaoh of Egypt in the time of Moses illustrates this truth very well. When, by God's command, Moses appeared before Pharaoh to demand the release of his people from Egyptian slavery, Pharaoh was incredulous. *Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go."* (Ex. 5:2)

But Pharaoh learned over time that he had no choice in the matter. He had to submit to the sovereign will of the Lord. And, when, in one final rebellion against it, he sent his army in pursuit of the Israelites, he lost them in an event that still terrified the hearts of Jericho's citizens forty years later (cf. Josh. 2:10). And similar, if not always as spectacular, demonstrations of the sovereignty of God were seen over and over again throughout Israel's history.

The superiority of God's kingship and kingdom is a frequent subject for the writers of the Psalms. Here are some representative samples:

- Ps. 47:8 *God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne.*
- Ps 93:2 *Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity.*
- Ps 103:19 *The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.*
- Ps 145:13 *Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations.*

Daniel was given even more insight into the extent and the duration of God's sovereign power. This was partly through a dream God gave the mighty Nebuchadnezzar and which Daniel interpreted for him (cf. Dan 2). The rock that crushed the giant golden statue of the king's dream became a mountain that filled the earth; it was nothing less than a kingdom that would endure forever.

Nebuchadnezzar was suitably impressed. But after a time he thought of nothing but the power and glory of Babylon, which he attributed to himself. Soon after that, he lost his sanity and his kingdom for seven times (probably years) until he acknowledged that the Most High God was sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gave them to anyone he wished (Dan 4:32).

This message of God's sovereign and eternal power over every other kingdom was reinforced later in Daniel's life in a dream given to him in the first year of another king of Babylon, Belshazzar. In it Daniel saw one like a son of man, to whom the "Ancient of Days" gave authority, glory and sovereign power such that all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion, as Daniel was made to understand (Dan. 7:13-14), is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Jesus later had much to say about God's eternal kingdom, i.e. God's absolute right and authority over the whole of the seen and unseen world. That idea is reinforced by the way he started off the prayer meant to be a model for all human prayer: "Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come; your will be done." No other name, and no other kingdom, and no other will makes any sense if these are in any way opposed to what the sovereign creator of the universe has in mind. Jesus had much more to say too. But we're limiting ourselves mostly to the Old Testament, and, as we've seen, you cannot read it without recognizing the claim it makes for the absolute sovereignty of God.

Nor is it only the power God exercises over his whole creation that is impressive; so is the way God cares for everything under his control—his providence. Ps 104:27-30 describes this Providence of God for all the creatures he has made: *These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.*

Dr. Gordon Spykman has some cogent comments about God's providence: "The biblical concept of providence expresses two main ideas, namely, that God *upholds* and *guides* all things. [It used to be popular to speak of God as a kind of infinitely powerful watchmaker, who, once he finished his work, wound it up and left it to run on its own. Creation is not like that.

Nor is God] a kind of absentee landlord who allows the world to run its course by *natural law*." God is not only the Creator, but also the sustainer, nourisher, and caretaker for "all that exists, ceaselessly undergirding the life and replenishing the resources of his creation. Should he withdraw, this cosmos would fall into chaos."

See, for example, Ps 33:6-7, which expresses this truth poetically: *By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.* [That is what God did in creating; now what he continues to do in his providence:] *He gathers the waters of the sea into jars; he puts the deep into storehouses.*

In ancient times, many occurrences in nature and human lives were attributed to fate. Yet, the doctrine of God's providence tells us that there is no such thing as fate, luck, or fortune, for God is continually watchful, effective and active. Dr. Spykman puts it like this: "Creation cannot exist apart from the Creator. It cannot run on its own powers... moment by moment all life - plant, animal, and man, together with all the physical forces in the universe - is upheld by those everlasting arms." Spykman, 43

Although the word providence itself is absent from the Bible, the concept of God looking after things is assumed on every page. The story of Joseph is a good one to explain the inner working of divine providence. Joseph was the favorite son of his father, but detested by his brothers as a dreamer and sold into slavery by them. In Egypt, Joseph's owner initially valued him as a responsible steward but later sent him to prison as the abuser of his wife.

But "the overruling providence of God intercepted the hostile intentions of men, bending evil into good" so that God's intention would be fulfilled for Joseph to be the preserver and protector of his people. Neither Joseph, nor any other human understood what was happening for a long time. But Joseph finally put his whole life story in perspective with these words to his brothers (Gen 50:20): *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

And God's sovereign and providential care was repeated over and over in the history of the descendants of Jacob—from what he did to rescue them centuries later from Egyptian oppression, to what he did to give them a homeland, and, after they lost it through disobedience, to restore them to it, and eventually to send a Redeemer, not only for them, but for all who would accept him as their savior and master.

"The *beginning* of everything—the affairs of people and nations, the movements of planets and atoms—lies in the decision of God to create. And since then, God has been moving his creation to his desired end. Article 12 of the Belgic Confession says something about this end to which God is working. *He has given all creatures their being, form, and appearance, and their various functions for serving their Creator. Even now he also sustains and governs them all, according to his eternal providence, and by his infinite power, that they may serve man, in order that man may serve God.*

"Christian faith therefore rejects *chance* as the answer to life's questions. Things do not just *happen to happen* the way they happen. We are not senseless victims of arbitrary... forces. There are laws and structures built into the world-order, which operate under the steadying hand of their Maker and Keeper, who neither slumbers nor sleeps. This confidence assures us of the regularity of life's processes and the outcome of our endeavors."

Still, since God's ways are higher than ours we are often left with baffling questions which keep coming back to haunt us, questions about the relationship between God's sovereign will and human freedom, and about why God does not intervene as much as we would like to prevent the terrible impact of evil on our world.

Our understanding of these things is partial at best, although we will come back to look at this in another lecture. But one thing is sure; the answer is not to be found in one of the many false notions of providence that is in the air these days.

- That of the humanist who sees God as the gentle and congenial philanthropist nudging humanity along in their evolutionary climb toward Utopia.
- That distorted idea of providence such as Hitler appealed to in an attempt to legitimize his destiny as leader of the super-race.
- That vague notion of Providence which sees it as a convenient substitute for God
- Or the denial of providence found in nihilism, that philosophy which, in a world groaning under the almost unbearable weight of nuclear stockpiles and civil wars and famine and social revolution, cries aloud: 'God is dead! Nothing makes sense!

Nothing could be farther from the biblical truth, which, even if we don't understand it perfectly, is so well stated by the Heidelberg Catechism (A 27): "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 not by chance but from his fatherly hand." That is an unspeakable comfort and one to rest upon, knowing that he holds in check the devils and all our enemies, who cannot hurt us without his permission and will.

The end to which God is bringing us may seem a long way off. And it may also seem to us that God's providence is somewhat disorderly and unpatterned. This is not too surprising, because we work on a pretty limited time horizon. But actually things are in good hands, and they never get out of hand. To God there are no miscues or accidents, even though to us things do apparently happen *by chance*. "But God, as it were, moves forward from his predestined Word to providential acts. In response, it is our business ...in childlike trust, to leave the secret things to the Lord and live instead by the revealed Word, responding to God's providential acts in prayer, saying "Your will be done" and then living the way he calls us to live."

Human planning is not useless; it can help us fulfill God's direction for our lives. However, God remains in control, and we must not forget it. For his will is ultimately done—sometimes along with our cooperation, but sometimes in spite of it. When you recognize God's sovereignty as the most important aspect of your daily plans, you'll see amazing things begin to happen. Annoying distractions will turn into anointed directions. An impossible situation will turn into an opportunity for faith. The feeling that your world is falling apart will turn into the assurance that God is at work in even the worst that life throws at you.

"God not only keeps things going, he also keeps things moving toward their established goals. He directs, governs, and guides. Therefore, though to us his ways are often past finding out, still life does have an underlying rhyme and reason. The times are not out of joint. Things do not really go astray. For all things work together for good unto the coming of his kingdom, here and now, and in the end, until Christ is all in all."