



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

The Theology of the Reformers

TRANSCRIPT

“Divine Providence, or Has God Lost His Grip on Things?”

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the opportunity and privilege of this particular hour. We thank Thee for Thy word and for the comfort and assurance that comes to us as we think about the wonderful promises that Thou hast given to us.

We thank Thee too, Lord, that we read in the word of God that the affairs of this universe are in strong hands. And we are confident, Lord, that Thou wilt accomplish Thy purpose in all of its details, and so we anticipate, Lord, the glorious future that Thou hast for those who by Thy grace have come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray that Thou wilt give us instruction and guidance and spiritual blessing as we think again of the truths of the word tonight. We commit each one to Thee. We know, Lord, there are many problems, and many trials, and many perplexities that probably are represented by the lives of those who are gathered in this auditorium or at least among their friends and in their families, and we pray, O God, Thy blessing upon them. We commit the hour to Thee with thanksgiving and praise.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] Now our subject tonight as we begin a brief study of divine providence is “Divine Providence, or Has God Lost His Grip on Things?” And I would like to read

“Divine Providence, or Has God Lost His Grip on Things?” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2007 Believer’s Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

just two verse from the word. The first from the Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter 1 and verse 11, in which the Apostle Paul writes,

“Also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to his purpose, who works all things according to the counsel of his will.”

Notice that last statement or that last clause, who works all things after the counsel of his will. And then Colossians chapter 1 and verse 17 in the passage called by New Testament scholars, “The Great Christology,” the apostle writes,

“And he (that is, Christ) is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Now notice the last part of that verse: “and in him all things hold together.” I do think I will read one more. The verse is found in Hebrews chapter 1 and verse 3. Hebrews chapter 1 and the third verse. We read here,

“And he is the radiance of His (that is, the Father’s) glory, and the exact representation of his nature, and upholds all things by the word of his power. When he had made purification of sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.”

Notice the clause, “and upholds all things by the word of his power.” He works all things according to the counsel of his own will, Ephesians says. All things hold together in him, or in him all things consist, Colossians says. And here he upholds things by the word of his power. Providence.

It is rather striking that the word “providence” is not found in the Bible. The doctrine of providence, however, is found all over the Bible. Now we should not be surprised by this, because, as I have often said and as others have often said, the doctrine

of the Trinity is in a similar situation, for the term Trinity is not found in the Bible, and yet the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the foundation stones of Christianity.

We do not have any reference in the Bible to the old nature. But we do have other terms that say much the same thing that men mean when they use the term old nature, for the Bible speaks about flesh and the flesh in an evil sense, and there are other indications of the fact that the apostles and the New Testament authors conceived of the Christians who had been born again as still having the sin principle in their members.

So, while the term providence is not found in the Bible, the doctrine of providence is, and we should not be upset by the fact that we do not have that term, specifically.

What is meant by providence? Let me define it for you. Providence is the continuing divine work of God preserving all His creation, of cooperating (I’ll read it again) with all things that come to pass, and of directing all things to their appointed end. Providence. Providence is the continuing divine work of preserving all of His (that is, God’s) creation, of cooperating in all that comes to pass (and the cooperating of course is God cooperating with the events), and of directing all things to their appointed end.

Now I’ve stressed three words. They are the words, preserving, cooperating, and directing. Now if you’ll look at the outline, you’ll see that we’re going to try to expound the doctrine of Providence around these three key terms of preservation, of cooperation, and of direction or government.

Now let me make a distinction here, too. Theologians distinguish between general providence, which is God’s control of the universe as a whole, and special providence which refers to each part in relation to the whole. So when we speak about general providence, we are speaking about God’s control of the universe. But when we talk about his special providence, we are talking about his personal care for each individual who makes up part of his universe. So God exercises general providence to the whole of his creation, but with reference to me and with reference to you, it is his

special providence. So those terms are found in theological discussion, and we should at least be acquainted with them.

There are these three elements in providence. Now they are not separated, actually, in their operation, but we are separating them in order to discuss them separately. The three elements are: preservation, cooperation or concurrence – now, concurrence is the technical term theologians use, and if you were to read a systematic theology, you would probably find this term used rather than cooperation, and I have used the other simply because I think it’s a synonym that we all might understand a little better than the expression, concurrence. Now, concurrence is, I say, the common technical term. And then the final word is the word, government, which refers to God’s direction of the creation.

John Wesley used to say, “I read the newspaper to see how God is governing the world.” Now that is a good motive for the reading of the newspapers, especially in a day such as this, we find some most interesting things in our newspapers concerning the Nation Israel, concerning the Nation Egypt which, as you know, looms large in biblical prophecy of the last days, too. And then one of the elders, Mr. Pryor, was just talking to me about the significance of Edom in Bible prophecy, and its relationship, too, to the events that are transpiring at the present moment. It is rather interesting that we do have Israel and Edom, the area of Edom, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt figuring very prominently in the things that are happening today.

I will not, however, make the mistake of many Bible teachers of saying this is that, or in the first place, I don’t know that this is that. In the second place, I doubt that this is that. [Laughter] And I guess probably a third reason – preachers always have three points, don’t they? [More laughter] But I’ve lost that third one at the moment.

John Wesley, however, gave us some interesting advice, and I think it was true that we ought to read the newspapers in the light of the biblical revelation and the things

that we see do reveal to us how God is carrying on his affairs, and how he is working all things out toward the ultimate conclusion that is described in the word of God.

The doctrine of providence is a doctrine that a number of ancient philosophies had difficulty with. For example, the Epicureans believed that the world was governed totally by chance. Well the doctrine of providence was a denial of the doctrines of Epicurus. The doctrine of providence was also a denial of one of the other important ancient philosophies, the doctrine of Stoicism. The Stoics believed that the world was governed by fate. They stood on the other end of the pendulum, and the doctrine of providence is a denial of that doctrine, too.

Providence also refutes modern natural science, which believes that the world is controlled by an ironclad system of scientific law. I know that this is very common today, and I think in most of our universities and colleges this is the kind of doctrine that prevails. It’s rather striking, too, I think, that modern man thinks of himself as estranged from the world in which he lives, the exact opposite of the biblical doctrine of providence, which says in effect that there is a very close relationship between the beings who belong to God and the purposes and plans that he has for them, and this universe in which they live. This universe, according to the Bible, is under the control of God and it is also being operated or governed by God with the end in view of the spiritual blessing of the saints of God.

Man is estranged from the world today, and I think that probably we could center attention on three reasons for this. There is the scientific motif that I’ve just referred to, and according to the scientists today who are not believers – many of course are believers – but those who are not believers think of providence as a bromide for pre-scientific naïveté. It’s not unpalatable because of the deeper insights of scientific method, according to them. The world is locked up in natural causes and in a system of cause and effect in which there is a totally closed system, and there can be according to modern

scientific thought, no intervention from beyond the present universe of which we are a part.

Many of our religious leaders have accepted this philosophy, such as Rudolph Bultmann. All of his theology is based on that as a presupposition that God does not ever intervene in the affairs of this life so that we are in a closed continuum of cause and effect, a totally naturalistic type of presupposition.

Then there are those who say that there is estrangement between man and the universe because of a projection motif. Religion is the projection of human subjectivity. Karl Marx is an outstanding illustration of this, because he felt the average person believed in spiritual things or accepted religion because it was a means of satisfying what he felt he needed in order to make life bearable. And so all that religion is is a kind of wish, and because it was a wish it became a reality, but it does not really have any reality at all.

I have tried from time to time to point out that is for a biblical Christian. It might make sense if we think of spiritual things, or the spiritual truth of Christianity as simply teaching about a God of goodness and mercy. It’s interesting to me how people like Marx and others who espouse an explanation for Christianity or any other religion of revelation, how they think that the God that these people worship is a God of goodness only. They do not know anything about or do not accept the idea that they might really believe in a God who judges people, because of their sin.

Now if it’s true that this God is a God who does punish sin, then that of course could not be a kind of projection for us so that we would believe in what we thought would make life bearable, because the idea of a God who judges us for our sin makes life somewhat unbearable if you are not in harmony with him. So the Christian doctrine of a God who is not a God of love and a God of justice is just the kind of doctrine that that explanation does not fit. So the idea that what we have in religion is a projection of human subjectivity, we want a God and so therefore we have a God, is totally contrary to

Christianity. The philosophy of the atheists is always grounded in fundamental ignorance of the truths of divine revelation.

Then there are some who feel that we are, today we are a group of people who are on a planet has no meaning whatsoever. Humanism has collapsed, and that humanism has been replaced by a nihilism, and so man must or should spend all of his years in orgy or to continue in boredom or to bow his head in submission to the tyranny of a pitiless fate. The Christian doctrine is so beautiful in its meeting of the basic needs of men and yet with a God who could only be a God of divine revelation.

Well now let’s look for a few moments at the subject of divine providence, and first of all, the doctrine of divine preservation. And we’ll begin contrary to the second and third points with the proof of the doctrine, and then we will discuss the proper idea of it.

The proof of divine preservation is both direct and inferential. I’d like to ask you to turn with me to a few passages of Scripture which I think will give us scriptural basis for the doctrine of preservation. The first is the passage that we looked at when we read Colossians chapter 1. It is Colossians chapter 1 and verse 17. Colossians chapter 1 and verse 17.

When I was making the original Scripture reading, I commented on the fact that New Testament students called this passage “The Great Christology.” They call it The Great Christology because, beginning at the 15th verse and going through the 20th verse, we have some remarkable revelation concerning the person of our Lord.

For example in verse 15 it is said, “And he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things were created.” Now I think that has to do with our Lord as the architect of the universe. For notice the prepositional phrase, “in him were all things created.” That is, our Lord was the one who drew the plans for the universe. “In him all things were created, both in heaven and on the earth, both are invisible and visible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers and authorities, all things were created through him (he is the builder of the creation) and for him.” That is, this

whole creation is ultimately designed to have as its goal the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And, Paul continues, “He is before all things (so he’s not part of the creation), and in him all things hold together.”

Now that doctrine there is the doctrine of preservation. In him all things hold together. He’s the Creator of the universe. He’s the architect of it, the builder of it. He is the ultimate goal, and in the meantime, he is the one who holds it all together: in him all things hold together or consist. Now if that is true, then all of the affairs of this universe rest ultimately in our Lord’s hands. Practically, that means of course that you do not draw even a breath apart from the express permission of the Second Person of the Trinity. “He is the God,” as Daniel says, “in whose hands Thy breath is.” You cannot be sure of any breath except the one you are drawing right now. And that comes by virtue of our Lord’s permission. In him all things hold together. Now that seems to me to teach that our Lord is the preserver of this universe.

Let’s look at Deuteronomy chapter 33 and verse 12. Deuteronomy chapter 3 and verse 12. I did not look up this verse again this afternoon. I hope this is the right verse. Deuteronomy chapter 33 and verse 12. Deuteronomy 33 and verse 12. I’m always fearful of asking you to turn to a verse and then discovering that I have it wrong in my notes.

“Benjamin, he said, may the beloved of the Lord dwell in security by him who shields him all the day, and he dwells between his shoulders.”

Beautiful expression of God’s preservation of his own.

Now look at verse 25,

“Your locks shall be iron and bronze, and according to your days so shall your leisurely walk be. There is none like the God of Jeshurun who rides the heavens to your help and through your skies in his majesty. The eternal God is a dwelling place, and

underneath are the everlasting arms. (Isn’t that a beautiful expression? Underneath are the everlasting arms) And he drove out the enemy from before you and said, ‘destroy.’ So Israel dwells in security. The fountain of Jacob secluded in a land of grain and new wine. His heavens also drop down dew.”

Let’s turn to the New Testament to Matthew chapter 10 and verse 29, a passage that not long ago we looked at in the exposition of the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew chapter 10 and verse 29. Here we read, our Lord is speaking,

“Are not two sparrows sold for a cent, and yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.”

There’s a little bit of a question about the meaning of that last clause, “not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.” I think it has been the more popular interpretation that not a sparrow falls in death to ground that God does not notice. On the other hand, there is good indication for the correctness of interpretation that says that “not one sparrow hops on the ground without the Father knowing it.” And if you have sparrows around your house, you know of course, that seems to me is the ultimate inconsequential movement [laughter], a sparrow hopping on the ground. And not one of them hops on the ground apart from the Father. So, this it seems to me is extremely strong evidence that accounts for the fact that God controls even the incidental little movements of our universe.

Now let me say just another word about proof, but now from the standpoint of inference and specific scriptural reference. The teaching of God’s preservation of his universe follows from the sovereignty of God, because you see, God would not be absolutely sovereign if anything occurred in this universe independently of him. Now I don’t think we have much difficulty with this in Believers Chapel, but believe me, there

are people who do not attend Believers Chapel who find it very difficult to believe that God does control all of the affairs of men.

I frequently have conversations with people who, many of them are genuine Christians, but they have not been exposed to the kind of teaching with its stress on God’s sovereignty that most of you have been exposed to, and they find it difficult to believe that God really does control everything that happens in our lives. And I think I have seen some of the reasons why God has given us this wonderful doctrine, because when things happen that are very difficult for us to understand, which are tragedies or disappointments, or things that are very puzzling to us, you can see that whether you hold to this doctrine or not, it affects very definitely how you respond to those things that happen to you.

And if you do not believe in the sovereign preservation of God of all things and a tragedy happens, it is inclined to throw you into a spiritual tailspin because you have nothing on which to lean in that kind of crisis. So I think it’s very important for our Christian comfort and our Christian understanding in our own lives to realize that the things that happen to us happen within the will of God, speaking in its broad sense. So, the very idea of God’s preservation of the universe follows from the sovereignty of God, and he could not be an absolutely sovereign sort of God if there are things independent of him that are happening in his universe.

It also follows in the nature of man, because by our creation by God there is written into our being the doctrine that we dependent beings. Right from the beginning we are dependent beings. And in fact, we are never happy until we are property dependent upon God.

Now we know as result of the Fall, man has sought to go his own way. He cannot really be autonomous, because it is either a question of being a slave of our Lord or a slave of sin. But he thinks that he would like to be free, and so he is free to serve sin, and only free to serve sin. When redemption comes, he now becomes the slave of

our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, having been bought with a price. He is a dependent being, whether lost or saved, he is a dependent being, so he cannot exist apart from God.

A man who thinks that he can exist independently is like a little infant that thinks that it can exist apart from its mother. And an infant trying to exist apart from mother is one of the most pathetic things that you’ll ever see. They cannot exist apart from mother, and that to me is just the picture of the man, born into this world, born in sin, thinks he can live an independent existence. It’s just as ridiculous as that little three months old baby fighting mother, when mother is his or her total life. So, the very fact that God is sovereign and man is dependent means that this doctrine of preservation must be the biblical teaching which we have seen the Scriptures say.

Now let me say just a word about the proper idea of the doctrine. Preservation is God’s continuous work of maintaining his creation and their endowed properties. In other words, when God preserves – and this is an aspect of his providence – he continuously maintains his creation and all of the properties that he has implanted in his creation.

Now this is not a purely negative idea. The deists thought that God in a sense had created this universe and had left it with certain powers by which it could operate itself. And so the deists of the 17th and 18th Centuries conceived of the universe as being created by God and God had gone back to his home in heaven, having done his work, and the creation was then existing by the powers that he had implanted within it, very much as if God has created a watch and left it on the table to run by itself.

But when we say that God is preserving the universe, we do not mean it in that negative sense. The creation cannot ever be self-sustaining. It must maintain a continuous relationship to the Lord. That’s why we read, “In him all things hold together.” It is in him – not in them – but in him, all things hold together.

Now we don’t mean on the other hand that creation is a continuous activity of God as the pantheists believe, or at least as they were in danger of believing. They

believe that the creation and second causes had no real or continuous existence, but emanated out from the absolute being or God. But that kind of view destroys free agency. It destroys moral accountability. And it destroys moral government.

And while we insist strongly that the Bible teaches the sovereignty of God, we teach just as strongly that the Bible teaches the responsibility of man before God. It teaches free agency – not free will – free agency, moral accountability, moral government. And this was something that the pantheists could never harmonize with the truth.

Now all of this course has its proper practical application. About twenty-seven years ago in Dallas Theological Seminary chapel, it was February 8th, 1950 (I keep all of these dates in my mind, you understand [laughter]). And that morning we had the privilege of hearing in our chapel message Tom Olson, who was a very prominent Bible teacher and Christian, and used to be the editor of a little magazine that was read rather widely in the United States. Mr. Olson was a very fine Christian man, gave a lot of his time to the evangelization of individuals.

He spoke in chapel, and he told us he had always wondered what he would do when someone held him up. I’ve often wondered that, too. Wonder what I’ll do – just collapse? Faint? Be so afraid that I’ll shout out something I’ll be sorry about? Or will I get mad and grab the pistol from the fellow and shoot him? [Laughter] Read in the papers, “Preacher Shoots Thief [more laughter]?” What will I do? I don’t know.

Well, he said he was finally held up by four men. And one of them held a pistol against his heart. Another shined a flashlight right into his eye. Another was searching his pockets. And a fourth was standing guard.

He said, the man was going through his pockets, and finally he came across a little book in his pocket, and he said, “What’s that?” And Mr. Olson said, “It’s the Bible!” And he said the man dropped it on the ground and all four of them ran. And he said, just as they ran, he said the Lord implanted a verse in his heart, “The wicked fleeth when no

man persueth, but the righteous shall be bold as a lion.” [Laughter] Well that was the providence of God. It really happened. It was the providence of God in his live.

That’s the doctrine of preservation: God preserving by a continuous activity his creation and also the properties with which he has endowed that creation.

Now let’s look secondly at the doctrine of cooperation or concurrence. This, too, is an aspect of providence. We’re just trying to analyze what providence means. It means preservation. It also means concurrence or cooperation. Now this is a little difficult to grasp, and if you are lost, then you have had a common experience with others.

What is the meaning of cooperation or concurrence? One of the outstanding theologians, Professor Louis Berkof – everybody ought to have Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology* and ought to read it; may take you a good while to read it, but you ought to read it. Now, he is an amillennialists, and there are a few other things about him that are not altogether scriptural, but it is an excellent volume and will greatly help you in what the Bible teaches as doctrine.

Professor Berkof defines this particular aspect of Providence as, “The cooperation of the divine power with all subordinate powers according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do.” What Professor Berkof means by this is that embodied in the concept of God’s providence is the cooperation of God with all the subordinate powers for which he is responsible, according to the established laws of their nature. And of course, he’s the one who has established these laws of their nature. So it is God cooperating with the subordinate powers – second causes – in the accomplishment of his purposes.

Now this concurrence is previous and predetermining in a logical sense. That is, it is He who is responsible for the activity in man as he carries out through man his purposes. It is not that we originate independent ideas. It is that he himself works in his creation, operating with them to the accomplishment of his purposes.

Let me give you an example of this in the Christian life. In the Christian life we read, or the apostle writing in Philippians in connection with the Christian life, the apostle says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” He’s talking to Christians. That epistle is written to Christians. You Christians work out your own salvation. That seems to mean I have implanted the seed of salvation within you. You have the new life. Now it is your responsibility to work it out.

But then he adds, because I’m sure that most of us would say, Well if I have to work it out myself, I’m afraid it’s not going to be worked out. He adds, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you (well, to do his will).” But that would raise a question, But my will seems to be unalterably set in opposition to God’s will. So, how can I in my will desire the things that God desires? So remember he says, for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. So, he does work in our wills so that we will to do his will. Now that is God working concurrently, but it is he who initiates the work. It is he who accomplishes his work through us.

It is a simultaneous concurrence. Never does the creature work independently of God’s will and power. Now, I do think that when we say simultaneous, we’re talking simply about chronology, not about logic. Logically, it is God who works both to will and to do of our good pleasure, but we don’t notice any difference. We don’t say, Now just a moment or two ago he worked to change my will and now I’m going to do. This all occurs as far as we are concerned in the same moment.

It is an immediate kind of concurrence, and according to most students, he does not work through me, but through the Holy Spirit, he works directly in our own spirits. So that is the doctrine of concurrence.

But let me now say a word about the scriptural evidence for it. Now what we are saying then, by this, is that men are controlled by the will of God. Now let’s read a few passages that I think say just this. Let’s turn to Genesis chapter 45 and verse 5. Genesis

chapter 45 and verse 5. Now this is the most interesting incident of Joseph and his experience in connection with his brethren and Egypt. And we read in Genesis chapter 45 and verse 5,

“And now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves (Joseph says to his brethren) because you sold me here. For God sent me before you to preserve life.”

Notice the seventh verse,

“And God sent me before to preserve for you a remnant in the earth. (Verse 8)
Now therefore it was not you who sent me here but God, and he has made me a father to Pharaoh and a lord of all his household and a ruler over all the land of Egypt.”

Now you can see from this that men are controlled by the will of God. And incidentally, this does indicate that even evil things may be used by God for a specific, good purpose. That’s what he did. The brethren sold [sic., Joseph] into bondage, but Joseph says it was not you who did it. It was God who did it. And furthermore, he did it in order that life might be preserved. It was done for you. And amazing, amazing thing.

And incidentally, that shows us how we ought to respond to the things that happen to us. How would you respond if you were sold into slavery by your brethren? Well, if there was a weapon nearby, I think I know how you would. But Joseph by responding as he did, became the kind of man that he became.

Exodus chapter 4 verse 11 and 12. Exodus 4:11 and 12.

“Then Moses said to the Lord (this is the 10th verse), ‘Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.’ (He was a Southerner [laughter])

The LORD said to him, ‘Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say.’”

And so God has told Moses that he will become his directing force. Men are controlled by the will of God.

Turn to Proverbs chapter 21 and verse 1. This is a very familiar passage which we often quote. But it’s a very important one. Proverbs chapter 21 and verse 1,

“The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord (now, the king is the sovereign), He turns it wherever he wishes.”

So the heart of the king is under the control of God in heaven.

Well, let’s turn now to our third aspect of the doctrine of providence. It includes the idea of preservation. It includes the idea of divine cooperation or concurrence. And then it includes finally, the doctrine of government.

What is meant by government? Government has to do with the end of God’s works, the ultimate end. It is that continued activity of God whereby he rules all things teleologically. That is, he is carrying on all things toward a certain conclusion. Now in the Epistle to the Hebrews, we read that he upholds all things by the word of his power. Now that’s a very interesting word, that “uphold” in verse 3 of Hebrews chapter 1. It’s a word that means, literally, “bearing,” bearing all things by the word of his power.

Now it was a word that was used by Moses when he described the problems that he had with the Nation Israel. He said, Lord, you’ve put all of these people on my back, so to speak, and I am bearing these people to the Promised Land. So it’s a word that suggests movement toward a specific goal. Here he says, “The Son of God bears all things by the word of his power.” We are inclined to think that what this means is he is a

kind of Atlas who stands with the whole world on his shoulders and with his physical might he is keeping this world in place. But that’s the point of Hebrews 1:3. The idea there is the idea of government. That is, there is movement and activity and there is a goal. And the goal or the aim or the ultimate end is his kingdom and the eternal state and ultimately the glory of God in all of his soteriological activity.

So, the proper idea of the doctrine of divine government is that it refers to the activity of God by which he rules all things teleologically and secures the accomplishment of the divine purpose. Now it is the government of the King of the Universe.

Let’s look at a passage or two. I don’t think we have much question of this, but let’s look first at 1 Timothy chapter 1 and verse 17. 1 Timothy chapter 1 and verse 17. Here, the writer says, the apostle, “Now to the king (expresses this beautiful doxology) eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God be honor and glory forever and ever.” Notice the stress on the fact that this is the king through the ages. Now to the king of the ages. So, when we speak about divine government, we’re speaking about the king of the universe.

It is also a rule that is adapted the nature of the creation. In the physical world, she uses his own laws of nature. In the mental world, he uses his own laws of mind. Moral influence he uses, but he governs by influencing men and influencing things so that ultimately his purposes his are accomplished. And this government of his is a universal government. Even the most insignificant things are involved; as we said, a sparrow hopping on the ground, and the most significant things, the creation of a new heavens and a new earth and the eternal state. So, even from these little, insignificant things, to the most significant things, they all fall under the government of this great king.

Now we know our Lord Jesus said even the hairs on your head are numbered. There was a preacher who referred to that particular text, and he said to his audience that, “Some of you, my hearers, do not even believe that your heads are all numbered. But the Bible says that the hairs of your head are all numbered.” I won’t say anything further

about that. The thing that that means is obvious. Now the doctrine is taught I think by this one text in Hebrews chapter 1 verse 3. “He upholds all things by the word of his power.”

Now let me conclude by just pointing out one or two things by the significance of the fact that the doctrine of divine providence is taught in the word of God. I really believe that this doctrine is a doctrine that would be of the greatest help to us if we could really grasp the significance of it and rely upon it when the trials of life come. It is a solace to believers, even in prosperity, he gives us favor in the eyes of Egyptians. Isn’t that interesting? He gives us favor in the eyes of the Egyptians. Twenty-five years ago, we would have thought that’s such an odd text. Favor in the eyes of the Egyptians. Who would care? [Johnson laughs] But today, it’s a little bit more significant.

And the certainty of his providence helps us in all of the adversities of life. Joseph didn’t stop to dwell on his brothers’ treachery as I pointed out. Otherwise, he would never have been able to show a brotherly attitude to them and be the means of their own ultimate deliverance. Job did not turn his attention to the Chaldeans and seek revenge. When we are unjustly wounded by men, we are to overlook this wickedness, mount up to God and learn to believe that our experience are sent to us by God for our edification, sometimes for our discipline. And the knowledge of the providence of God in his affairs with us is a most significant thing.

Now I’ve left a little time because I want to read something to you. It comes from a fairly well-known theologian. I’ll tell you his name after I finish reading it. But this, I think, is a very beautiful statement of the practical significance of the doctrine of divine providence. This is what he writes,

“Hence appears the immeasurable felicity of the Godly mind. Innumerable are the evils that beset human life. Innumerable, too, the deaths that threaten it. We need not go beyond ourselves since our body is the receptacle of a

“Divine Providence, or Has God Lost His Grip on Things?” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2007 Believer’s Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

thousand diseases; in fact, holds within itself and fosters the causes of diseases. A man cannot go about unburdened by many forms of his own destruction, and without drawing out a life enveloped as it were with death. For what else would you call it when he neither freezes nor sweats without danger? Now, wherever you turn, all things around you are not only hardly to be trusted, but almost openly menace and seem to threaten immediate death. Embark upon a ship, you are one step away from death. Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is in peril. Go through the city streets, you are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roof. Enter an airplane, and you’re subject to hijacking. If there is a weapon in your hand or friend’s, harm awaits. All the fierce animals you see are armed for your destruction, but if you try to shut yourself in a walled garden, seemingly delightful, there a serpent sometimes lies hidden. Your house, continually in danger of fire and other animals, threatens in the daytime to impoverish you; at night even to collapse upon you. Your fields stand exposed to hail, frost, drought and other calamities, threatens you with barrenness and hence famine. I pass over poisonings, ambushes, robberies, open violence which in part besiege us and our home, in part dog us abroad. Amid these tribulations, must not man be most miserable? Since, but half-alive in life, he weakly draws his anxious and languid breath as if he had a sword perpetually hanging over his neck. You will say, these events rarely happen or at least not all the time, nor to all men and never all at once. I agree. But since we are warned by the examples of others that these can also happen to ourselves, and that our life ought not to be any more accepted than theirs, we cannot be but frightened and terrified as if such events were about to happen to us. What therefore more calamitous can you imagine than such trepidation? Besides that, if we say that God has exposed man, the noblest of creatures to all sorts of blind and heedless blows of fortune, we’re not guiltless in reproaching

“Divine Providence, or Has God Lost His Grip on Things?” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2007 Believer’s Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

God, but here I propose to speak of that misery with which man will feel if he is brought under the sway of fortune. Yet when that light of divine providence has once shown upon a godly man, he is then relieved and set free, not only from the extreme anxiety and fear that were pressing him before, but from every care. For as he justly dreads fortune, so he fearlessly dares commit himself to God. His solace is, I say, to know Heavenly Father so holds all things in his power, so rules by his authority and will, so governs by his wisdom that nothing can befall except he determine it. Moreover, it comforts him to know he has been received into God’s safe-keeping and entrusted to the care of his angels, and that neither water nor fire nor iron can harm him except as insofar as it pleases God as governor to give them occasion. Thus indeed the Psalm sings, for he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence, under his wings he will protect you, and in his pinions you will have assurance. His truth will be your shield. You will not fear the terror of night nor the flying arrow by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness nor the destruction that wastes a midday. For this also arises in the saints the assurance that they may glory, the Lord is my Helper; I will not fear what flesh can do against me. The Lord is my Protector, what shall I fear? If armies should stand together against me, if I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will not cease to have a good hope. Whence, I pray you, do they have this never-failing assurance but from knowing that when the world appears to be aimlessly tumbling about, the Lord is everywhere at work and from trusting that His work will be for their welfare. Now, if their welfare is assailed, whether by the devil or wicked men, then indeed, unless strengthened through remembering and meditating upon Providence, they must needs quickly faint away. But then recall that the devil and the whole cohort of the wicked are completely restrained by God’s hand as by a bridle, so that they are unable to hatch either any plot against us, or having hatched it to make preparation, of if

“Divine Providence, or Has God Lost His Grip on Things?” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2007 Believer’s Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

they have fully planned it to stir a finger toward carrying it out, except so far as He has permitted, indeed commanded. Let them also recall that the devil and his crew are not only fettered, but also curbed and compelled to do service. Such thoughts will provide them abundant comfort, for as it belongs to the Lord to arouse their fury and turn and direct it whither He pleases, so also is it His to set a measure and limit lest they licentiously exalt in their own lust.”

And he concludes this section by saying,

“In short, not to tarry any longer over this, if you pay attention, you will easily perceive that ignorance of Providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.”

That’s from John Calvin. And when I inserted that about getting on a plane and being hijacked [laughter], that was variant reading [more laughter] which I inserted in the text, because there were several in the audience that could obviously tell by the cover of the volume that it was Calvin, and I saw them punching one another and saying, “It’s John Calvin, It’s John Calvin” [more laughter]. And the look of consternation that came over their face was an evidence [loud laughter] of the trials of life. And I wanted to see how they reacted to the providence of God there.

One last word. You may remember the experience that Isaac had with Esau and Jacob. Do you remember that experience? Rebekah was so anxious that Jacob should inherit the blessing that when, one day, Isaac had said to Esau, go out and kill an animal and come in a fix me some food that I like so much, she immediately in her female anxiety, to be sure that Isaac would bless Jacob as, after all, God had promised when he was born. You’ll remember they carried on that subterfuge of Rebekah killed the animal, cooked it, and that savory meat so that Isaac who was blind now would love it. Then

fitted out Jacob in the clothes of Esau and also fixed his neck with the skins that might make Isaac think that he really was Esau. And ultimately, you know that Isaac was fooled.

And the striking thing is that though he had doubts and questions about it, he nevertheless went forward and he blessed Jacob. Just after that happened, in comes Esau, offers to go through the same kind of thing, and then of course they both discover that Isaac had been tricked by Jacob and by Rebekah.

It’s very striking the way that Isaac responds to it. You might think that he would say, “Well, I take my blessing back.” No, we read now,

“It came about as soon as Isaac had finished Jacob, and Jacob had hardly gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau came in from his hunting. Then he also made savory food and brought it to his father and he said to his father, ‘Let my father arise and eat of his son’s game, that you may bless me.’ And Isaac, his father, said to him, ‘Who are you?’ And he said, ‘I am your son, your firstborn, Esau.’ Then Isaac trembled violently and said, ‘Who was he, then, that hunted game and brought it too me so that I ate all of it before you came and blessed him?’”

And then the significant words are added,

“Yes, and he shall be blessed.”

And Isaac recognized what was, for him a minor tragedy, he recognized the hand of God. And that is was all carried out in such a way that God’s purposes were accomplished. Isaac would have done his best to rebel against the already stated word of God that the elder would serve the younger. But God overruled, by the deception of a woman and a crooked man, but Isaac was enough of a believer in the plans and purposes

and workings of God to realize that in this evil deed, this deceptive thing that they accomplished, God had manifested his will.

It’s a very comforting thing to know that in the experiences of life, God does preserve. He does cooperate to accomplish his purposes. He is in control of the affairs of this world. No, he hasn’t lost his grip on things, Mr. Pryor told us Sunday. He was right.

Now we to continue this and deal with some of the special aspects of it in our next two or three studies, and go into a little more detail of the relationship between providence and history, and providence and miracles, and providence and prophecy. Let’s close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these wonderful doctrines of the word of God and we surely do need them. In the experiences of life, Lord, it is wonderful to know that Thou art in control. Give us, Lord, the grace to respond to the experiences of life in such a way that Thy name is honored and glorified.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.