

FATHER IS HERE ITS ALRIGHT

Text: Psalm 46; Psalm 104

Heidelberg Catechism LD 10

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Does God have a plan for your life? I was once asked: 'God knows what he has planned for each and everyone of us. He knows when we will die. But does that mean he also knows how we will eventually die? Are the day and the method by which you die pre-planned by God. Is he in control of that?' What we are dealing with in this question is the 'providence' of God. Lord's Day 10 provides an initial answer to the question. Note it says "... *all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand... All creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they can neither move nor be moved.*" Looking at that, the simple answer to the question is –yes. God is in control of all of it.

Let me also read to you from the Belgic Confession. It shows there is more to it, that it is not straight forward. Article 13: "**The Doctrine of God's Providence:** *We believe that this good God, after He created all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to His holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without His orderly arrangement. Yet God is not the author of, nor can He be charged with, the sin that occurs. For His power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that He arranges and does His work very well and justly even when the devils and wicked men act unjustly. We do not wish to inquire with undue curiosity into what He does that surpasses human understanding and is beyond our ability to comprehend. But in all humility and reverence, we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, being content to be Christ's disciples, so as to learn only what He shows us in His Word, without going beyond those limits. This doctrine gives us unspeakable comfort since it teaches us that nothing can happen to us by chance but only by the arrangement of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures under His*

control, so that not one of the hairs on our heads (for they are all numbered) nor even a little bird can fall to the ground without the will of our Father. In this thought we rest, knowing that He holds in check the devils and all our enemies, who cannot hurt us without His permission and will..."

Now I want you to notice the tone of those references. The message that comes through in both the Catechism and the Belgic Confession is 'Father is here, it's alright. Life has not gone crazy, it's not by chance. Things are in hand!' What we have here reflects many Bible references like Psalm 104 and Romans 8. It is a simple message of trust and reassurance that was originally written to a confused and hurting people. You need to understand this: what we have written in these confessions is not 'armchair' theology written in a safe and comfortable place. You might recall how I explained with Lord's Day 9 that after the Reformation many protestants were persecuted and even killed. What those people needed at that time in their confusion and terror was a real and deep reassurance of God's nearness and power. The teaching here builds on the teaching of Psalm 46 "*God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help*". And Psalm 104 "*when you open your hand they are satisfied*". You see that reflected in the Catechism's language: "*Providence is the Almighty and ever present power of God, by which he upholds, as with his hands, heaven and earth and all creatures.*" Notice how the definition is couched in terms of a very close, personally involved God. To the persecuted Christians it was deeply reassuring to know: 'Father is here, its OK, we are in his hands.'

Now this emphasis on the presence of God and his control of things is something we need to be reminded of today. The theory of evolution says the world has evolved to where it is now. There is no god; everything happens by chance and the survival of the fittest. The theory of 'deism' which has been strong since the Enlightenment says God is the watchmaker. He made everything and now it all runs by the 'laws of nature'. God is hands off, he does not get involved. Another view that is strong today, is called 'Open Deism'. It was made popular by Rabbi Kushner who wrote the book 'When bad things happen to good people'. This view says that God deeply sympathises with our situation: 'God is weeping right alongside you.' But he can't do anything about it. He is mighty but not almighty. So he is with us in our suffering. He is loving and kind; but has no control'. It's a view people have come to accept because they cannot admit that a loving God, who is also almighty, would allow suffering. But if you look at the Bible it

says that God is almighty, and is always with his creation. That comes out so strongly in Psalm 104. He is what keeps it going. The earth turns, the sun shines, the grass grows and babies are born because of the presence and power of God. If God should withdraw his presence everything would disintegrate and be no more. Everything was formed by his Word. And God's Word maintains it all. God directs it all. He is very involved. He 'upholds' and 'governs' everything. Look at Psalm 104:27-29: *"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 turn your face they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust."*

Now while things are going well that all sounds wonderful. But there are times when life hits us very hard and the assurance is knocked out of us. Every year again we are struck by natural disasters. There are the earthquakes and hurricanes with thousands losing their lives. Now, if God 'upholds' and 'rules' all things, if God is in control, then why such enormous tragedy? Did God 'permit' such things? Did he cause them? We can wonder about the presence and care of God. 'Where are you God?' The Confessions, reflecting the Bible would say 'It's OK, steady, don't despair. This is still God's world. It is not a meaningless chaos. Father is still in control'. But beyond that they don't provide an answer because such involves an understanding beyond our ken. As Isaiah 55:9 confesses: *"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts declares the Lord."* And as the Belgic Confession says: *"... nothing happens in this world without His orderly arrangement. Yet God is not the author of, nor can He be charged with, the sin that occurs. For His power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that He arranges and does His work very well and justly even when the devils and wicked men act unjustly. We do not wish to inquire with undue curiosity into what He does that surpasses human understanding and is beyond our ability to comprehend."*

We need to recognise that we are dealing with a paradox here. A paradox is of course when you have two positions that are contradictory yet both are true at the same time. Look carefully at the Bible and you will see two things clearly stated again and again. One is that we humans are responsible for our own actions. The cause of suffering and death is the rebellion of the human race against God. That is why the entire creation is under a curse. So says Paul in Romans 8 that *"...the whole creation is groaning"*. That's

why there are the earthquakes and floods, and there is disease and sickness. So much of the suffering is due to our own failures. Yet the Bible also clearly teaches that God is sovereign. Says the Catechism: *"All creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they can neither move nor be moved"*. How do we cope with this massive contradiction? We don't cope well with paradoxes. We have great trouble holding two contradictory positions at once. We either go for one way or the other. Either we are responsible or God is. But the Bible shows that both must be accepted and believed at the same time. Like the radiator fan belt on your car's motor, it must be held in tension or it won't work and the motor overheats. So we must hold in tension the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of humans. You see, if we hold just to our human responsibility then God is not Almighty and is not Sovereign. He is then weak, dependent on how we respond. Then God, if he is there, can only sit in heaven and watch and wring his hands in worry. On the other hand if God only is responsible then he is a malicious tyrant, the author of evil, who causes people to suffer terribly and just watches. The Bible is very clear that God is not the author of sin. As James writes (1:13) *"God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone"*. Many books have been written on this issue, much of it is complicated. We say things like God did not 'cause' the suffering but he 'allows' it. But saying that still makes it sound like God is cruel. We have to acknowledge, as the Belgic Confession does, that what we are dealing with is way, way, beyond our understanding. But then, by definition, God's ways would have to be. What sort of God can be fully comprehended by humans?!

We need to be very careful here of simplistic responses, especially in pastorally caring for those who suffer. People tend to say things like, it was 'God's will'. It was 'their time'. God has a 'plan for you'. To say to a parent it was God's will your child had an accident is harsh. To say that a little girl sexually abused was God's plan for her is abhorrent. The Bible makes it very clear what God's views are on such matters. Listen to Jesus in Matthew 18 as he puts a child on his lap and says: *"Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin it would be better for him to have a millstone thrown around his neck and be thrown into the depths of the sea."* To have Jesus use 'mafia language' shows how angry he is at the thought of children being abused and sinned against. Such raw passion shows Jesus wants to rid this world of all such wrong and suffering. Revelation talks of the new heavens and new earth when *"...every tear shall be removed"*. That is where God's heart is. That is his passion and goal. And yet we confess: *"God keeps all creatures under His control, so that not one of the hairs on our heads (for they are all*

numbered) nor even a little bird can fall to the ground without the will of our Father."
So all things come from his fatherly hand.

How do we account for this? We can't. The Bible is saying that we are to trust God, because it is too complex to understand. When you try to work it out and explain it, you go to either extreme and screw it up. You end up making God a monster or a wimp. The Bible says don't explain, please trust. Imagine a little boy lost from his parents on a bush walk. He has been lost for a while and it is getting dark. The little fellow is hungry and frightened. As it becomes completely dark he starts to panic. He is terrified of all the strange sounds coming from the bush. His imagination starts to go wild which heightens his terror. He just stands there and cries and wets himself. Questions race through his mind: what are all those awful things out there? What if some animal attacks me and eats me? Where are mum and dad? What if I'm never found? In this state of frenzy he does not hear something coming up behind him, reaching out ...and picking him up. 'It's alright son, dad has found you. It's alright now dad is here'. Safely tucked in the arms of his father the little boy's fear melts away. All his questions no longer matter. All that stuff isn't important any more. That is the approach of the Bible and the Confessions. We don't have answers to our questions but we trust God. The attribution theory in psychology says the reason we ask questions is somehow through our understanding to gain control of our lives so we can feel secure. We need to be able to attribute a cause. But if we have that sense of security, our questions fall away. They don't matter so much any more. The Bible and our Confessions here are demonstrating where our security lies. With God our Father who has everything in hand.

The proof of all we are saying is seen in Jesus. His suffering on the cross was a terrible injustice, a cruel, horrific suffering. We know full well who was responsible. We can point at Pilate and the Pharisees and the fickle crowd. But they were representing us, the human race. Yet, at the same time it was God's will. He had planned this from eternity. It was the Father's will that his Son should suffer. But through this awful evil has come the greatest good. In God's wisdom and power, beyond all measure, God has used evil to overcome evil. In God's amazing grace we have the way of forgiveness. Look at the cross and see how much God loves. If a simplistic view of God's sovereignty has you wondering if God is cruel, look at the cross and see what God has given to make you his own. A God who loves so much as to be willing to sacrifice his own son is not some

one who callously pre-determines your life, your suffering, your death. He is a God so awesome that he controls our evil, and that of a cursed world, in such a way that he will ultimately bring everything to good. We just have to trust him in that. Especially when it hurts so much.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- What is the approach of the Heidelberg Catechism and Belgic Confession (reflecting the Bible) to God's providence? Why?
- What is the paradox in the Bible in relation to God's providence? What two poles must be kept in tension? What are the implications if we don't maintain the tension?
- Why is it important to be careful in saying 'God has a plan for you, this is his will'?