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PREPARATION

Secs 1-3 Providence, as taught in scripture, asserted

Sec 4 Scriptural providence contrasted with universal providence

Secs 5-7 The Scriptural doctrine proved; that God's active involvement and control extends to all events and actions, completely excluding any room for chance to have an influence.

Providence is defined in this chapter, on 201, 32ff: *At the outset, then, let my readers grasp that providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events.*

EXPLORATORY

1. *...faith has its own peculiar way of assigning the whole credit for creation to God.* What is 'peculiar' about the way people of faith (ie true Christian faith) understand creation? (197, 2ff & 11ff)
 - a. *...we must differ from profane men especially in that we see the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception.*
 - b. *...unless we pass on to his providence...we do not yet properly grasp what it means to say: "God is Creator."*

Those who do not have such faith may conclude that there is a Creator God but they stop short of believing that all that happens is actively governed by him and serves his purpose. What is the best that unbelievers generally conclude? (197, 14ff)

- a. *Carnal sense, once confronted with the power of God in the very Creation, stops there, and at most weighs and contemplates only the wisdom, power, and goodness of the author in accomplishing such handiwork.*
- b. *It contemplates moreover, some general preserving and governing activity, from which the force of motion derives.*
- c. *...carnal sense thinks there is an energy divinely bestowed from the beginning, sufficient to sustain all things.*

If this is our view of God and his relationship to creation, what does that make him in our eyes? (197, 1f)

- a. *...a momentary Creator, who once for all finished his work*

...faith...having found him Creator of all, ought to do – what? (197, 23ff)

- a. *...penetrate more deeply...to conclude he is also everlasting Governor and Preserver*

Of what does this deeper penetration consist (negative and positive)? (197, 25ff)

- a. *...he is also everlasting Governor and Preserver – not only in that he drives the celestial frame as well as its several parts by a universal motion*
- b. *...but also in that he sustains, nourishes, and cares for, everything he has made, even to the least sparrow [cf Matt 10:29]*

Having asserted the doctrine of providence as he understands it, Calvin now turns to the Scripture passages that teach it. Which passages does he cite and/or refer to? (198, 1ff)

- a. Matt 10:29
- b. Ps 33:6
- c. Ps 33:13ff
- d. Ps 104:27-30
- e. Acts 17:28

How does David in Psalm 33 show the connection between God as Creator and God as everlasting Governor and Preserver? (198, 2ff)

- a. *David, having briefly stated that the universe was created by God immediately descends to the uninterrupted course of His providence, "By the work of Jehovah the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth" [Ps 33:6; cf. Ps 32:6, Vg]. Soon thereafter he adds, "Jehovah has looked down upon the sons of men" [Ps 33:13; cf. Ps 32:13-14, Vg]*

Why is this, the best order (198, 13)? (198, 9ff)

- a. *...because it would not be believable that human affairs are cared for by God unless he were the Maker of the universe, and nobody seriously believes the universe was made by God without being persuaded that he takes care of his works*

Contrasting, philosophers...and human minds, with David, in what way does David go much further than the mass of humanity? (198, 13ff)

- a. *In general, philosophers teach and human minds conceive that all parts of the universe are quickened by God's secret inspiration. Yet they do not reach as far as David is carried, bearing with him all the godly, when he says: "These all look to thee, to give them their food in due season; when thou givest to them, they gather it up; when thou openest thy hand, they are filled with good things; when thou hidest thy face, they are dismayed; when thou takest away their breath, they die and return to the earth. If thou sendest forth thy spirit again, they are created, and thou renewest the face of the earth" [Ps 104:27-30 p.].*

Why do ...philosophers...and human minds, not go as far as David in perceiving God's intimate involvement in everything? (198, 26ff)

- a. *...because they do not at all taste God's special care, by which alone his fatherly favour is known.*

2. What ...depraved opinion, not only obscures but almost buries ...what we ought to believe concerning providence? (198, 33)

- a. *...all things come about through chance*

Thus far, what has Calvin told us in this section that we ought to believe concerning providence? (198, 30f)

- a. *God's providence, as it is taught in Scripture, is opposed to fortune and fortuitous happenings.*

When considering why things happen, how should we respond Christ's words, *But the very hairs of your head are all numbered* (Matt 10:30) and how does this differ from the attitude of unbelievers? (199, 2ff)

- a. *Carnal reason ascribes all...happenings, whether prosperous or adverse, to fortune. But anyone who has been taught by Christ's lips that all the hairs of his head are numbered [Matt 10:30] will look farther afield for a cause, and will consider that all events are governed by God's secret plan.*

Does ...*God's secret plan*, show itself only in the actions of animate creatures such as other people or animals? (199, 7ff)

- a. *...concerning inanimate objects we ought to hold that, although each one has by nature been endowed with its own property, yet it does not exercise its own power except in so far as it is directed by God's ever-present hand.*

To which inanimate object does Calvin draw our attention because of the way it illustrates the principle he has just stated? (199, 15)

- a. *...the sun.*

What functions do we ascribe to the sun? (199, 15ff)

- a. *...lighting the whole earth with its brightness*
- b. *...by its heat it nourishes and quickens all living things!*
- c. *...with its rays it breathes fruitfulness into the earth!*
- d. *...it warms the seeds in the bosom of the earth, draws them forth with budding greenness, increases and strengthens them, nourishes them anew, until they ripe up into stalks!*
- e. *...it feeds the plan with continual warmth, until it grows into flower, and from flower to fruit!*
- f. *...with baking heat it brings the fruit to maturity!*
- g. *...in like manner trees and vines warmed by the sun first put forth buds and leaves, then put forth a flower, and from the flower produce fruit!*

If these effects are caused by the light and heat of the sun, on what basis does God, *claim the whole credit*, for them? (199, 25ff)

- a. *The Lord...willed that, before he created the sun, light should come to be and earth be filled with all manner of herbs and fruits [Gen 1:3, 11, 14].*

What conclusion about the sun does the Godly person draw from the order in which things were created? (199, 28ff)

- a. *...a Godly man will not make the sun either the principal or the necessary cause of these things which existed before the creation of the sun, but merely the instrument that God uses because he so wills*

Why is this a legitimate conclusion? (199, 32f)

- a. *...with no more difficulty (God) might abandon it, and act through himself.*

What conclusion do we draw from recorded miracles in which the sun behaved unusually? (199, 36ff)

- a. *God has witnessed by those few miracles that the sun does not daily rise and set by a blind instinct of nature but that he himself, to renew our remembrance of his fatherly favour toward us, governs its course*

What is it about the seasons that points to their being under God's control, rather than simply rotating in a mechanistic way? (199, 41f)

- a. *...such great and uneven diversity*

3. When the Bible speaks of God's omnipotence – how should we not define that that concept? (200, 2)

- a. *...not the empty, idle, and almost unconscious sort*

Calvin disassociates himself from those who think that God's omnipotence is expressed via ...*a general principle of confused motion*. What sort of thoughts characterise this wrong understanding? (200, 5ff)

- a. *...as if he were to command a river to flow through its once-appointed channels*
- b. *...he can indeed act, yet sometimes ceases and sits in idleness*
- c. *...he...continues by a general impulse that order of nature which he previously appointed*

Contrasting the Biblical view with these errors, when we speak of God's omnipotence what should we mean? (200, 3f)

- a. *...a watchful, effective, active sort, engaged in ceaseless activity*
- b. *...an omnipotence...that is directed toward individual and particular motions.*

Why is God deemed omnipotent? (200, 7ff)

- a. *...he is deemed omnipotent...because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so regulates all things that that nothing takes place without his deliberation.*

What Biblical statements does Calvin cite and refer to in support of his view? (200, 12ff)

- a. *...when, in the Psalms, it is said that "he does whatever he wills" [Ps 115:3; cf Ps113(b):3, Vg], a certain and deliberate will is meant.*

How does experience teach us that this is so? (200, 17ff)

- a. *...in times of adversity believers comfort themselves with the solace that they suffer nothing except by God's ordinance and command, for they are under his hand.*

In what way do we, if we enclose ...*God's governance...within the stream of nature*, curtail the richness of our own experience? (200, 23ff)

- a. *We ...defraud...(our)selves of a most profitable doctrine (if we) confine God's providence to such narrow limits as though he allowed all things by a free course to be borne along according to a universal law of nature.*
- b. *...in this way God's particular goodness toward each one would be too unworthily reduced.*

Who else is defrauded by this view? (200, 23)

- a. *We ...defraud God of his glory*

What is taught in Psalm 8:2 that reinforces this doctrine? (200, 30f)

- a. *...infants still nursing at their mothers' breasts are eloquent enough to celebrate God's glory*

Why do infants do this? (200, 32f)

- a. *...immediately on coming forth from the womb, they find good prepared for them by his heavenly care.*

To what does Calvin trace the variability of mothers' milk supply? (201, 1f)

- a. *...God wills to feed one more liberally, but another more meagerly.*

In what way do, those who ascribe just praise to God's omnipotence doubly benefit? (201, 4ff)

- a. *First, power ample enough to do good there is in him in whose possession are heaven and earth, and to whose beck all creatures are so attentive as to put themselves in obedience to him.*
- b. *Secondly, they may safely rest in the protection of him to whose will are subject all the harmful things which, whatever their source, we may fear; whose authority curbs Satan with all his furies and his whole equipage; and upon whose nod depends whatever opposes our welfare.*

Why is it absolutely necessary for us to recognise that God is always active and to recognise the total extent of his omnipotence? (201, 11ff)

- a. *...we cannot otherwise correct or allay these uncontrolled and superstitious fears, which we repeatedly conceive at the onset of dangers.*

What characterises a superstitiously fearful reaction to dangers or threats? (201, 13ff)

- a. *We are superstitiously timid...if whenever creatures threaten us or forcibly terrorise us we become as fearful as if they:*
 - a. *... had some intrinsic power to harm us*
 - b. *...might wound us inadvertently or accidentally*
- b. *...or there were not enough help in God against their harmful acts.*

What Biblical example of inordinate fear does Calvin give from Jeremiah 10:2? (201, 19f)

- a. *...the prophet forbids God's children "to fear the stars and signs of heaven, as disbelievers commonly do"*

How do we know that our fear has become excessive? (201, 21ff)

- a. *When we imitate unbelievers who ...transfer the government of the universe from God to the stars, they fancy that their bliss or misery depends upon the decrees and indications of the stars, not upon God's will...their fear is transferred from him, toward whom alone they ought to direct it, to stars and comets.*

What do we need to constantly call to mind in order to protect us from this error? (201, 28ff)

- a. *...there is no erratic power, or action, or motion in creatures, but that they are governed by God's secret plan in such a way that nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by him.*

4. After the foregoing discussion of the characteristics of providence, what it is and what it is not, this section opens with a definition of providence, which is – what? (201, 32ff)

- a. *...providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events.*

With what two views does Calvin contrast providence, as he understands it? (202, 10ff)

- a. *...bare foreknowledge*

- b. *...a governance...of a confused and mixed sort...namely, one that by a general motion revolves and drives the system of the universe, with its several parts, but which does not specifically direct the action of individual creatures.*

Calvin regards the second view as, *not so crass*, as the first but he nonetheless finds it, *not tolerable*? What specific faults does he find with it? (202, 15ff)

- a. *...by this providence...they teach that nothing hinders all creatures from being contingently moved or man from turning himself hither and thither by the free choice of his will.*
- b. *...they so apportion things between God and man that God by his power inspires in man a movement by which he can act in accordance with the nature implanted in him, but He regulates His own actions by the plans of His will.*

What does this, *so apportion(ing) of things between God and man*, amount to in practice? (202, 22ff)

- a. *...the universe, men's affairs, and men themselves are governed by God's might but not by his determination.*

What did (and do) Epicureans believe about God's government? (202, 26)

- a. *God is idle and indolent*

And what did others, who were just as foolish as the Epicureans, believe? (202, 27f)

- a. *God so ruled above the middle region of the air that he left the lower regions to fortune*

What opinion makes God the ruler of the universe in name only? (202, 30ff)

- a. *...the opinion...that concedes to God some kind of blind and ambiguous motion, while taking from him the chief thing: that he directs everything by his incomprehensible wisdom and disposes it to his own end.*

How widely held is this opinion? (202, 30f)

- a. *...almost universally*

Why does this view make God the ruler of the universe in name only? (202, 35f)

- a. *...because it deprives him of his control*

How does Calvin define, 'control'? (202, 36ff)

- a. *...so to be in authority that you rule in a determined order those things over which you are placed*

Calvin makes a conditional concession to the advocates of, *universal providence*. (*Universal providence*, is a term coined by those he is opposing for their own view that God does not actively control and cause everything. According to them, what happens in the universe is determined partly by the laws of nature that God originally created, partly by the exercise of human free will and only partly by God's specific interventions.) What is that concession and what is the condition on which Calvin is prepared to make it? (203, 2ff)

- a. *I do not wholly repudiate what is said concerning universal providence*
- b. *...provided they in turn grant me that the universe is ruled by God, not only because he watches over the order of nature set by himself, but because he exercises especial care over each of his works.*

Why does he not, *wholly repudiate what is said concerning universal providence?* (203, 6ff)

- a. *It is, indeed, true that the several kinds of things are moved by a secret impulse of nature, as if they obeyed God's **eternal** command, and what God has once determined flows on by itself.*

What proof texts does Calvin say, *we (ie he and those who agree with him) may refer to*, at this point, in support of the view that all things, *proceed from his set plan, that nothing takes place by chance* (203, 24)? (203, 9ff)

- a. *Christ's statement that from the very beginning he and his Father were always at work [John 5:17]*
- b. *Paul's teaching that "in him we live, move, and have our being" [Acts 17:28]*
- c. *...what the author of the letter to the Hebrews says, meaning to prove the divinity of Christ, that all things are sustained by his mighty command [Heb. 1:3]*

What do those who will not extend God's government to every event and action have to acknowledge? (203, 20f)

- a. *...many things take place under God's especial care*

What is wrong with this acknowledgment? (203, 21f)

- a. *...they wrongly restrict this to particular acts alone.*

What, then, do those who believe as Calvin believes have to demonstrate? (203, 22ff)

- a. *Therefore we must prove God so attends to the regulation of individual events, and they all so proceed from his set plan, that nothing takes place by chance*

5. Sections 5, 6 & 7 are the passages in which Calvin sets out to prove that his understanding of providence is the teaching of scripture. We conclude, from the closing sentence of section 7, that he considers this job done: *From this we gather that his general providence not only flourishes among creatures so as to continue the order of nature, but is by his wonderful plan adapted to a definite and proper end.*

Calvin expresses the view that he is opposing thus: *...the beginning of motion is with God, but ...all things, either of themselves or by chance, are borne whither inclination of nature impels.* How does this view recognise God's work in, *the alternation of days and nights, of winter and summer?* (203, 27ff)

- a. *...the alternation of days and nights, of winter and summer, will be God's work, inasmuch as he, assigning to each one his part, has set before them a certain law*

This is possible to believe all the while such things conform to a regular pattern but how do we explain departures from that pattern, such as when, *immoderate heat joined with dryness burns whatever crops there are*, or when, *unseasonable rains damage the grain*, or when, *sudden calamity strikes from hail and storms?* (203, 35ff)

- a. *...this will not be God's work, unless, perhaps because clouds or fair weather, cold or heat, take their origin from the conjunction of the stars and other natural causes.*

What is the problem with this, 'naturalistic', view? (204, 1ff)

- a. *...in this way no place is left for God's fatherly favour, nor for his judgments.*

6. Why was the universe established? (204, 31f)

- a. *...the universe was established especially for the sake of mankind*

Having seen, as we have, that God is intimately involved in every event, so much so that, *not one drop of rain falls without God's command*, and bearing in mind that, *the universe was established especially for the sake of mankind*, what does this lead us to expect from God's actions? (204, 32f)

- a. *...we ought to look for this purpose (ie the benefit of mankind) in his governance also.*

What Scripture passages does Calvin cite to show that men and women are not in control of their own lives, whatever they may think (204, 33ff)

- a. Jeremiah 10:23, *I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not his own, nor is it given to man to direct his own steps*
- b. Prov 20:24, *Man's steps are from the Lord and how may man dispose his way?*
- c. Prov 16:9, *A man's heart plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps*
- d. Prov 16:1, *The preparations of the heart belong to man, But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.*

Calvin seems to sum up the views of his opponents in the phrase; *miserable men take it upon themselves to act without God*. What is his estimate of this attitude? (205, 8f)

- a. *...an absurd folly...when they cannot even speak except as he wills!*

What phenomena does Calvin cite in this section's second paragraph, that we are apt to think of as fortuitous but which the Bible nonetheless ascribes to the direct action of God? (205, 11ff)

- a. *...when a branch breaking off a tree kills a passing traveler*
- b. *...lots*
- c. *...some lie in squalor and others rise up to honours*

What thought drives the Psalmist to the conclusion that God is behind the prosperity of some and the poverty of others? (205, 35)

- a. *God cannot put off the office of judge*

7. How do those who do not think that God controls the government of the universe explain 'natural' events for which he takes the credit and that forward his purpose? (206, 2f)

- a. *...this was outside the common course*

Calvin draws a different conclusion from these instances, which is – what? (206, 3f)

- a. *...no wind ever arises or increases except by God's express command*

What Scriptural phrases require us to believe what Calvin believes? (206, 5ff)

- a. *...he makes the winds his messengers and the flaming fire his ministers...he makes the clouds his chariots and rides upon the wings of the wind [Ps 104:3-4; cf. Ps 103:3-4, Vg.]*
- b. *"He commands and raises the stormy wind which lifts on high the waves of the sea" [Ps 107:25; cf. Ps 106:25, Vg.]; "then he causes the storm to become calm, so that the waves cease for the sailors" [Ps 107:29];*
- c. *"He has scourged the people with burning winds" [Amos 4:9, cf. Vg.]*
- d. *"for the fruit of the womb is his gift" [Ps 127:3p]*
- e. *"men do not live by bread alone" [Matt 8:3; Matt 4:4]*

- f. *...that earnest prayer for daily bread [matt 6:11] could be understood only in the sense that God furnishes us with food by his fatherly hand.*

What do we gather from Ps 34:15, *The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous and his ears towards their prayers*, together with Ps 34:16, *The eye of the Lord is upon the impious, to destroy their memory from the earth?* (206, 40ff)

- a. *...all creatures above and below are ready to obey, that he may apply them to any use he pleases. From this we gather that his general providence not only flourishes among creatures so as to continue the order of nature, but is by his wonderful plan adapted to a definite and proper end.*

8. What two reasons does Calvin give for refusing even to use the word, *fate*? (207, 6ff)
- a. *...it is one of those words whose profane novelties Paul teaches us to avoid [1 Tim 6:20]*
- b. *...because men try by the odium it incurs to oppress God's truth*

With whom is the notion of fate, as fate is commonly understood, associated? (207, 4)

- a. *...the Stoics*

What did the Stoics mean by fate? (207, 10ff)

- a. *...a necessity **out of** the perpetual connection and intimately related series of causes, which is contained in nature;*

When people describe Calvin's doctrine of God's all-pervasive providential activity as fate, what is their aim? (207, 3)

- a. *...to cast odium upon this doctrine*

How does Calvin distinguish his doctrine from, *the Stoics' dogma of fate*? (207, 10ff)

- a. *We do not, with the Stoics, contrive a necessity out of the perpetual connection and intimately related series of causes, which is contained in nature; **but** we make God the ruler and governor of all things, who in accordance with his wisdom has from the farthest limit of eternity decreed what he was going to do, and now by his might carries out what he has decreed...not only heaven and earth and the inanimate creatures, but also the plans and intentions of men, are so governed by his providence that they are borne by it straight to their appointed end.*

In the second paragraph Calvin introduces two factors that seem to affect the way things work out. What are they? (207, 20f)

- a. *...chance*
- b. *...contingency*

He deals first of all with chance.

What statement of Basil the Great does Calvin approve of? (207, 22f)

- a. *..."fortune" and "chance" are pagan terms, with whose significance the minds of the Godly ought not to be occupied.*

Why does Calvin feel that this saying must be true? (207, 24ff)

- a. *...if every success is God's blessing, and calamity and adversity his curse, no place now remains in human affairs for fortune or chance*

There follows a substantial quotation from Augustine on the proper meaning to be assigned to 'fortune' and 'chance'. What conclusion did Augustine come to about why we refer to certain things as 'chance occurrence(s)'? (208, 2)

- a. We do so because, to us ...*the reason and cause* (of the event) *are secret*

Continuing his commentary on Augustine, Calvin refers to Augustine's understanding of contingent events. ...*he excludes, also, the contingency that depends upon men's will.*

9. In this section Calvin deals with how inevitably think and speak because ...*the sluggishness of our mind lies far beneath the height of God's providence.*

This compels us to regard events as – what? (208, 29)

- a. ...*fortuitous*

When we regard events in this way what do we **not** mean? (208, 29f)

- a. ...*fortune rules the world and men, tumbling all things at random up and down*

What do we mean? (208, 32ff)

- a. ...*the order, reason, end, and necessity of those things which happen for the most part lie hidden in God's purpose, and are not apprehended by human opinion*
- b. ...*those things which it is certain take place by God's will, are in a sense fortuitous. For they bear on the face of them no other appearance, whether they are considered in their own nature or weighed according to our knowledge and judgment.*

In 209, 11ff Calvin turns again to contingent events. What does he mean by contingency? (209, 12)

- a. ...*future events...uncertain to us*

How do we think of the various possibilities that apply in our minds to the way things might turn out? (209, 12f)

- a. ...*we hold them in suspense, as if they might incline to one side or the other*

Although we must think that various outcomes are possible, what conviction do we hold in our hearts? (209, 14f)

- a. ...*nothing will take place that the Lord has not previously foreseen*

Why does the word, *fate*, still come to people's lips and why is it even found in the Bible? (209, 17f)

- a. ...*because at first glance men do not penetrate to the first cause, which is deeply hidden.*

Future events may seem to be contingencies and their eventual outworking mere chance. What does faith recognise to be behind them all? (210, 2)

- a. ...*a secret impulse from God.*

What quality does God's all-pervasive providence impart to items and events, that may not exist in the items and events themselves, as naturally constituted? (210, 12)

- a. ...*absolute necessity*

What example does Calvin give of something that was absolutely necessary, because it was God's will but not because of the natural qualities of the items involved? (210, 8ff)

- a. *...the bones of Christ...it was impossible to break them. God...subjected to fragility the bones of his Son, which he had exempted from being broken, and thus restricted to the necessity of his own plan what could have happened naturally.*

FOR REFLECTION

1. What problems do we tend to have with the Biblical view of providence expressed by Calvin?
 - a. Being able to explain all that God does, or justify it
 - b. God's use of secondary causes tends to distract us, so that we ascribe what happens to those secondary causes rather than to God
2. Why do we think Augustine concluded that *...nothing is more absurd than that anything should happen without God's ordaining it, because it would then happen without any cause?* Why must an event that has not been ordained by God lack a cause? Does Calvin/Augustine mean "cause" or "purpose"?