

Article

God Is Good: Why We Desire, Love, and Serve Him

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And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.” Luke 18:19

Chewning shares that contemplating the depths of God’s goodness in His acts of creation, redemption, and providence can only increase our desire to know Him better, to be with Him more, and to fellowship with Him more fully.

Why did God create anything or anyone? Why did He create the universe? Why did He create angels? Why did He create humans in His image? Why did He create at all? What motivated Him to become a creator? Of His many attributes, which one was at the core of His divine nature that moved Him to display all of his attributes by bringing forth a comprehensive creation and then allowing it to fall? What motivated Him to reveal Himself to created angels and humans? The highest end of creation is certainly the revelation of Himself in all of His awesome glory. But what divine aspect of His nature embodied the motivating facet of His character that moved Him to create and

thereby reveal Himself in all His glory? He had no need to create. His aseity testifies to this reality.¹ He clearly derives no personal benefit from His creation. Then why did He create?

Scripture does not explicitly answer the questions just raised. It is reasonable to believe, however, that God’s being good (*agatos* = “good” in the sense of excelling in every aspect of His personality, including being benevolent) was clearly an aspect of His character that motivated Him to create and to give the creation to Christ. In its essence, it can be stated that God knew it would reveal His goodness to create creatures that would bear His image and thereby could truly

know Him (Genesis 1:27; 5:1; 9:6; Colossians 3:10, etc.). This fact, coupled with His agape love (His *willful intention to seek the highest good for those whom He would create in His image*) is persuasive evidence that His goodness was a facet of His nature that moved Him to create.

Indeed, it is really impossible to separate the two attributes God is *good* and God is *love*, because it is God's goodness that displays His love. It would seem that *love* is the attitude or motivator that propels God into action which in turn puts on display His other attributes that, when "seen" in their consequence-producing activity, reveal just how *good* He is — infinitely good. We, His children, come to especially see and appreciate His goodness when we take the time to contemplate His acts of creation, redemption, and providence. These three spheres of God's activity clearly reveal His goodness to us. It is within these three spheres of God's rule that we encounter His intentions, thoughts, and behavior, all of which are only good.

Stephen Charnock, in his classic work, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (1996), said, "As God is great and powerful, he is the object of our understanding; but as good and bountiful, he is the object of our love and desire."²

He was not ignoring the biblical truth expressed by the Apostle John when he said, "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Charnock was simply expressing another biblically revealed truth that we also love God because He is good and bountiful to us. Psalm 116:1-2, 12-13, for example, makes this point abundantly clear.

*I love the Lord, because He hears my voice and my supplications. **Because** He has inclined His ear to me, **therefore** I shall call upon him as long as I live. ... What shall I render to the Lord **for all His benefits** toward me? I shall lift up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord (emphasis added).*

We cannot read the Psalms without noting that the writers are constantly rejoicing and declaring just how close and good to them God has been. After God delivered David from the hand of King Saul, we hear David say, "I love Thee, O Lord ... In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried to my God for help; He heard my voice ... He sent from on high, He took me; He drew me out of many waters. He delivered me from my strong enemy ... He

rescued me ...” (Psalm 18:1, 6, 16, 17, 19). David had experienced God’s goodness in the context of being providentially rescued from the hands of Saul. He knew that everything in life was under the sovereign control of God. And he declared, “I love Thee,” because God had heard him and rescued him.

It is the recognition of the good that God continually pours out upon us that motivates us to desire, love, and want to serve Him. We come to know God’s love for us through His demonstrated goodness to us. Therefore it would seem that God’s goodness is the essential component of His nature that the Holy Spirit impresses on our hearts, making it possible for us to truly desire, love, and serve Him and our neighbors. His goodness is clearly at the core of our motivation and resulting ability to love and serve Him. And this being so, it seem reasonable to believe that it was God’s desire for us to know Him through His goodness that was at the core of His decision to create a people who could know that He was good.³

God’s very goodness seems to this author to be behind His acts of creation, redemption, and providence. This perspective is supported by God’s declaration

at the end of each day of creation that the results of His creative work were good (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 31). And at the conclusion of His creative endeavors, “... God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (v. 31). May Christ fill our hearts with an even deeper desire for, love of, and joy in serving Him as we focus on just how good God is by contemplating His acts of creation, redemption, and providence.

God is Good: As Revealed Through Creation

“For since the creation of the world *His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature*, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Romans 1:20-21, emphasis added). The Word of God is plain: “His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made ...”.

Scripture tells us that at least some of God’s invisible attributes are clearly seen in His creation.

Indeed, several aspects of God's nature are named in the text — His invisible attributes; His eternal power; His divine nature. The Spirit has declared that there is no excuse for people not to comprehend through observing the created order that the Creator is powerful, so powerful in fact that it ought to elicit from His image bearers a desire to glorify Him — declare His awesome, incomprehensible power.

Furthermore, the Spirit has declared that the very power exhibited in the created order is of an eternal nature. Thus the eternal nature of God Himself is declared. Furthermore, logic dictates that we conclude that God's power must be eternal in nature or otherwise God would cease to be the Creator God — He would have to be a mutable, evolving, growing-up God if His power were not eternal. If God were a changing, developing, evolving God He would have been no God at all at some time in eternity past. God could not have Himself come into being from nothing, and if He were puny and had to grow up, there would have to have been another GOD who was the creator of God. The very notion of God demands that He be thought of as having been eternally God and as having therefore been eternally perfect in all of His attributes.

The notion of the eternal power of God points logically to a third attribute: God must have therefore been an eternally *immutable* God — one of the invisible attributes understood by contemplating the nature of the Creator. If God's power is eternal and unchanging, then the possessor of such power must Himself be immutable. It follows that if I AM WHO I AM (Exodus 3:14) could be mutable (changeable) in any of His attributes, then He would be mutable in all of His attributes. And if God were mutable in any way, He would be mutable in every way. And if He were mutable in every aspect of His nature, He could not be an eternal and divine God. He would of necessity be a “god” that exists by some chance/accident in the context of a chance/accident universe.

It also follows that if God's power is so incomprehensible and awe-invoking as to demand that we glorify Him because such a wonder has been revealed to us through the created order, then it follows that a fourth attribute of God is revealed through creation: His power is *infinite* — inscrutable, beyond searching out. Can anyone begin to comprehend measuring the power involved in calling the created order into

being when there was no visible existence besides God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 11:3)? The very word *infinite* exists in our vocabulary to describe just such realities — things that are real but exceed the human capacity to calculate either their three spatial dimensions or their time dimension.

Creation also reveals a fifth attribute of God. The Creator is the possessor and giver of *life* (John 5:26; 6:33; 11:25; 14:6; etc.). Life forms are seen throughout creation. Their existence declares their origin to have come from One supremely greater than themselves. All life that is external to God's own infinite and eternal life reveals a life that is given as a gift to its possessor. Our life did not originate within ourselves. The created order reveals that in this physical universe all life has a beginning and a conclusion.⁴ Indeed, the Life Giver is the only one that possesses life in and of Himself. He is *life*.

The five attributes of God that have been discussed are all clearly discernable through His acts of creation — He is *omnipotent* (all powerful); *eternal* (outside of time); *immutable* (unchanging); *infinite* (beyond measurement); and the sole self-possessor of *life*. Contemplating these five attributes

expands our understanding of God, but the sixth and last attribute we will examine holds the potential of opening the door of our heart so we can truly desire, love, and serve Him. Creation clearly reveals that God is *good*. Yes, very good. In fact, He is infinitely good. The goodness of God that is poured out upon us through His creative acts tangibly touches us and blesses us physically. We taste, touch, hear, smell, and see the Creator's goodness. It is all around us to be enjoyed.

God's goodness is unmistakably revealed though the creation. For example, the sun and the rain nurture an enormous variety of plant and animal life. The earth's natural resources are vast and beneficial to all that live on the earth. The variety and abundance of the food supply we enjoy, placed before all creatures, is staggering to contemplate — the fruits, nuts, berries, grains, roots, vegetables, and eatables from the sea, air, and land. We tend to take it all for granted, but the physical bounty around us in our temporal environment and the ability of most of it to replenish itself declares the glory of God and proclaims His infinite goodness.

The air we breathe, the clothes we wear, the shelter we enjoy, the beauty of the earth, the

clouds in the sky, the water that refreshes us, the birds that sing, the worms that aerate the ground, the energy that warms us, the modes of transportation that move us, the colors that please us, the medicines that foster healing, and the beyond-counting variety of other temporal, created things that benefit us all declare that God is *good*, and His redeemed children desire, love, and serve Him because He is good.⁵

Only God has the power to open our hearts to see the true depth of what is actually revealed to us through the created order. A clear illustration of this is found in the account of God’s conversation with Job in Chapters 38-41 of that book, where God asked Job a number of questions regarding His creation and

Job’s contemplation of it. Prior to God’s having this conversation with Job, Job had maintained that he was faultless before God. Then God came and confronted him. God said, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” (38:2). “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth!” (38:4). Where were you, Job, when I “enclosed the sea with doors, when, bursting forth, it went out from the womb; when

I made a cloud its garment ... and I placed boundaries on it ... and [said] ‘Here shall your proud waves stop?’” (38:8-11).

The conversation continued. “Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, and caused the dawn to know its place ...” (38:12). “Have you entered into the springs of the sea? Or have you walked in the recesses of the deep?” (38:16). “Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or have you seen the storehouses of the hail ...?” (38:22). “Can you lead forth a constellation in its season, and guide the Bear with her satellites?” (38:32). “Who has put wisdom

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in the innermost being, or has given understanding to the mind?” (38:36). “Who prepares for the raven its nourishment, when its young cry to God, and wander about without food?” (38:41). This questioning continued on and on and only befuddled Job all the more. God even challenged Job regarding the question of who made the ostrich appear to be so dumb as to abandon her eggs to the wild beasts and to treat

her young as if they were not her own. This is resolved in God's declaration that He "has made her forget wisdom, and has not given her a share of understanding" (39:13-17).

In Job 40:3-4, "Then Job answered the Lord and said, 'Behold I am insignificant; what can I reply to Thee? I lay my hand on my mouth.'" Job continued and said he will not say anything more. But, "Then the Lord answered Job ... and said, 'Now gird up your loins like a man; I will ask you, and you instruct Me. Will you really annul My judgment? Will you condemn Me that you may be justified ...?'" (40:6-8). And then God continued to relate to Job how He had made the mighty creatures of the sea (Leviathans) and the earth (Behemoths) in the rest of Chapters 40 and 41. And then came the climax in Chapter 42 where "Job answered the Lord, and said, 'I know that Thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted. ... I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ... I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee; *therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes*'" (42:2-6, emphasis added).

God revealed Himself to Job by drawing Job's attention to His

personal involvement in every detail of creation and its ongoing operations. What might any of us say at this point if a simple leaf from a maple tree were put in our hands and we were asked to say a few words about it? Would we speak as a botanist? Or would we perhaps say a few words about how the leaf reveals the wonder of God the designer, planner, creator, and sustainer of the leaf? It is true that God has assigned humanity the task of subduing and ruling His created order (Genesis 1:26, 28; Psalm 8:6-8; etc.), but to focus only on the creation and to fail to reflect upon the Creator simply reveals spiritual poverty. For to truly understand just how *good* God is, and to remember that it is He who has provided us with the vast riches of His creation to both enjoy and to use in ministry, can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, cause us to ascribe to Him the highest possible worth — worth that becomes worship, and worship that declares His glory.

God's acts of creation leave all humanity without an excuse for neglecting His worship or for failing to seek His "face" (self-revealing presence). The goodness of God that is revealed through the created order is not, however, revealed to the same degree or in the same light as His goodness is

revealed to us through His work of redemption. We will look now at God's acts of redemption and be reminded of just how profoundly the redemption of His fallen image bearers reveals the depth of His character, and specifically His *goodness*.

God is Good: As Revealed Through Redemption

We are going to take a very brief but extremely important theological “side trip” at this juncture in order to establish just how profoundly good God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are, revealed to us through their successful efforts in redeeming a people from the certainty of abiding eternally in hell. God never acted in any way to cause anybody to choose a world/lifeview that would culminate in a personal lifestyle leading an individual to hell. But God *permitted* our first parents, Adam and Eve, to both make a decision that resulted in their immediate spiritual death, their eventual physical death, and our subsequent spiritual/physical death. But even more importantly, our first parents' original sin caused them to run and hide from God, revealing an alienated “nature” that we, their posterity, all inherited. We can all say with

King David that we were all “brought forth [born] in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me [so that I had a ‘sin nature’ from the time of my conception]” (Psalm 51:5, with interpretative additions). We all, following our fallen nature, choose to reject God's Lordship in our lives until, by His grace and mercy, He initiates and affects a rebirth of our hearts so that we are effectively restored to fellowship with Him.

The theological excursion to be taken, however, is to establish the fact that God knew our first parents would not follow His instructions and would thereby be the first to sin and pass on to their posterity, through procreation, a sin nature. God knew this would be the case before He created anything. We know this because God the Father gave those who were to be redeemed to Christ to be His inheritance (Ephesians 1:18) *before times eternal*. We know this because the Apostle Paul tells us in Titus 1:1-2 that his faith in and knowledge of the truth regarding his having been promised eternal life was made certain by a promise God made before times eternal: “Paul ... for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, *in the hope of eternal life*, which

God, who cannot lie, promised *long ages ago*" (emphasis added).

And to whom was God making promises before times eternal? The promises were being made between the members of the Trinity. For example, in II Timothy 1:8-9 we read, "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me

His prisoner; but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved [redeemed] us, and called us with a holy calling ... according to His own purpose and grace *which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity* [literally: "before times eternal"]" (emphasis added). Scripture even goes so far as to tell us that the redeemed children of God have had their names recorded in "the book of life of the Lamb" from the foundations of the world (Revelation 13:8).

The reason this theological excursion is so important is that it is vital for us to understand the full implications of the fact that God the Father knew before there was anything created that the creation of a people who would bear His image would eventually require the agonizing rejection, humiliation, and pain by crucifixion of His Son, Jesus Christ, if any of His image bearers

were to ever enjoy an eternal relationship with Him. And God the Son knew this would be the certain consequence of His creative acts. And God the Holy Spirit knew it would be His task

... God the Son knew this would be the certain consequence of His creative acts.

to convict those whom He would bring to Christ of their sins (and sin nature) and to work with them to bring about their renovation into the likeness of Christ. It is the Holy Spirit's task to renovate the heart of those who are given to Christ by the Father. It is the Holy Spirit who regenerates the hearts of those who are "dead to God" so that they may become "alive to God" and accept by faith the work of redemption that the majestic Triune God has performed, is performing, and will perform for His adopted children.

We, the redeemed, will find it profitable to pause and contemplate the price God paid to redeem us, for nothing reveals the goodness of God like His work of redemption. Reflect for a moment on the perfect unity, harmony, and love that existed within and between the members of the Godhead before times eternal. And remember the aseity of God —

They had no “needs” whatsoever in the perfection of Their existence. And yet They, all three members of the Trinity, knowingly created image bearers who would reject Them; who would despise Them; who would feign allegiance to Them but who would in reality try to manipulate and use Them. They would be misunderstood; They would be thought of as being very limited in their knowledge — not knowing their thoughts and everything in their hearts; They would be thought of as being variable and subject to change; They would be thought of as being mutable and subject to change; and They would find their image bearers creating Them in their own likeness, not understanding just how holy, eternal, infinite, powerful, righteous, wise, just, and sovereign their Creator really is.

Indeed, humans who are alienated from God do not even want to think about Him unless they do so in a manner that makes God impotent, manageable, and small. Many years ago, a commercial airliner that was en route to Hawaii from San Francisco suddenly encountered violent air that caused the plane to plunge out of control for about 10,000 feet. The plane had not quite reached the halfway point between San Francisco and

Hawaii when this occurred; the pilot was not sure if the plane has sustained any serious physical damage; and some passengers and attendants had sustained minor injuries. So the pilot decided to turn around and return to San Francisco rather than continue on to Hawaii. This event occurred long before there was any type of airport security, and the TV reporters were right in the face of the passengers as they disembarked from the plane, asking them questions about their experience. A comment by a particularly frightened passenger still surfaces in my mind periodically. This individual appeared to still be emotionally shaken. The person acknowledged to the TV reporter that he was still scared. When asked: “Were you frightened by the turbulence?” he said, “No.” He was asked, “Were you frightened by the sudden plunge of the plane through space?” Again, he answered, “No.” Then he was asked, “Then what scared you?” His response was clear and unmistakable: “Thoughts of God filled my mind as we were plunging, and this nearly scared me to death. I had not thought about God for years. And these thoughts are still running around in my head.”

The TV reporter moved on to interview another passenger, and I have no idea how this real-life story ended, but it left an indelible impression on me. And I often couple my memory with the thought, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom ...” (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). The frightened passenger implied that he was scared of God because he thought of Him as a God who would judge him for ignoring Him. This idea of “God as judge” was, I believe, the source of the fear. The distance, however, between the “terror of the Lord” and the “awe of the Lord” is only a redemptive act away. I hope that someone who personally knew Christ and also knew this passenger was able to share the good news of Christ’s redemptive love with the passenger.

Nothing in all of creation reveals the depth and breadth of just how good God is as does the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’s participation in the actions taken by God to redeem a people for Christ’s inheritance. Christ’s own behavior best describes His participation in this saving activity:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although

He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself [laid aside His privileges], taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8, explanation added).

I cannot fully comprehend the depth of Christ’s love that would motivate Him to give up His privileges in the Godhead, take on flesh, and humble Himself by dying the death of a condemned criminal — a death which meant suffering the full wrath of His Father, a suffering He certainly did not deserve. Can we not hear the very echo of Christ’s question at the beginning of this article, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone,” and fail to respond, as did Thomas upon seeing the risen Lord, “My Lord and my God!” (Luke 18:19; John 20:28). Such goodness has led God to redeem a people for His own possession, a people who know Him, desire Him, love Him, and long to please Him by doing His bidding.

The word *redemption* has a number of usage nuances associated with it: to restore; to deliver from; to recover; to escape from; to purchase; to reconcile; or to supply satisfaction for a wrong committed. In the context of Christian theology, it is significant to note that when Scripture speaks of God's redemptive work it incorporates all of these nuances. For example, Christ's redemptive work is to be understood as a past, present, and an ongoing event in the individual Christian's life: at a time in the past when one was regenerated (reborn); a moment by moment continuing and sustaining reality of being redeemed; and that which will occur when Christ's "brothers and sisters" are finally and fully restored during the "period of restoration" — the day of final judgment and final redemption when all of the "old nature" is fully done away with and the "new nature" becomes the immortal reality (Acts 3:21; Romans 8:23; and Revelation 21:1).

Redemption incorporates our removal from the kingdom of Satan and our deliverance into the kingdom of Christ (Acts 7:34; Exodus 3:7-8; 6:6). It conveys the escape from the snares of the devil (II Timothy 2:25-26). It connotes Christ's purchase of His

"bride," the church (I Corinthians 6:20; I Peter 1:18-19; II Peter 2:1). It is God's act that brings about reconciliation between Him and those that have been deeply alienated from Him (Romans 5:10-11; II Corinthians 5:18; Colossians 1:21-22). In its deepest sense, however, redemption communicates the fact that the very holiness and purity of God is so offended by any sin whatsoever that God's very character required justice — a justice so wonderfully satisfied by Christ's taking the terrible wrath of His Father upon Himself in our stead. God has shown Himself thereby capable of being both just and a justifier, a holy redeemer (Romans 3:26). The most beautiful declaration of this glorious wonder is found in the text of Isaiah 53:

3 He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely our grief He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our

iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. 6 All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. 7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? ... 10 But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering ... 11 As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied, by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities (emphasis added).

Hallelujah! God provided a way for our redemption. Has there ever been such *goodness* shown at any time in the history of the

universe as in God the Father's intentional sending of His only begotten Son, first to live a sinless life and thereby qualify Himself to become the perfect "sacrificial lamb;" and second to freely offer Himself up as the substitutionary sacrifice to redeem us from the eternal punishment due us all; and finally, for the Holy Spirit to regenerate sinners so they are enabled to believe in Christ who justifies the ungodly and then deems their *faith* in Him and His redemptive work to be their *righteousness*? (Romans 4:5) No! There is no *goodness* that can be compared or equated with God's gracious and merciful work of redemption.

The Holy Spirit's regenerative work enables the previously dead-to-Christ person to embrace the truth of Christ's sacrificial and substitutive redemptive act (dying on the cross and subsequent resurrection), which sets in motion a whole renovative process: the Holy Spirit's work of cleansing the believer's heart through the use of Scripture (Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5); sustaining the believer's walk with Christ (I Peter 4:18; Hebrews 10:36-39; 12:1-3; Galatians 6:9; James 5:7-11); sanctifying or setting the believer apart to do Christ bidding (Hebrews 12:14-17; Romans 6:22); comforting

the believer when that is so needed (II Corinthians 1:3-11; Isaiah 51:12; etc.); chastening the believer when he needs correcting (Hebrews 12:4-13); etc. New and mature believers need this kind of assistance until the day of their final redemption.

This renovative work of the Holy Spirit can be likened to our purchasing an old house that needs to be thoroughly renovated in order for it to be both comfortable and attractive. We buy it and undertake the necessary work of rewiring, replumbing, reflooring, replastering, reroofing, etc., in order to turn the house we wanted into a home we will enjoy living in. In the same way, those who become the temples of God

(I Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; Romans 8:9; II Corinthians 6:16; and Ephesians 2:21-22) are undergoing a renovative procedure for the remainder of their earthly lives as the Spirit of God gradually transforms them more and more into the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:29). This renovative work has an immediate, ongoing, and lasting impact on the believer's world/lifeview. To be reborn and redeemed means they "see" and "hear" as they could not see and hear before. God is no longer One from whom they want to hide

or make into an impotent image of their own creation and liking, but He quickly becomes One to be sought and worshipped in the wonder of His true identity.

The redemptive work of Christ truly shows just how *good* God is. No other work of God reveals with such clarity and force the goodness of God, as does Christ's sacrificing His own life in order to purchase a people for His own inheritance. It is also true that a number of God's other attributes are simultaneously manifested along with the revelation of His *goodness* in His

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redemptive work. His holiness, just character, omnipotence, patience, and mercy, for example, are also closely tied to and are revealed, along with His goodness, in His redemptive work. Although these other attributes transcend the intent or focus of this particular chapter, they are not any less significant in pointing to God's perfect character.

God is Good: As Revealed Through Providence

The ideas brought under review in this section regarding God's *providence* are likely to be challenging to many readers

for three reasons. First, the biblical teaching regarding God's providence has not been at the forefront of the church's thinking and teaching for more than 100 years. For this reason most Christians are not familiar with either the idea or the reality that *God governs everything great and small through providence*. God's providence is simply a "forgotten truth." Second, those of us who live in North America have enjoyed so much freedom to do what we please that the idea of our choices and activities being under the rule, governing authority, and superintending control of an omnipotent, omniscient, holy God has not entered many of our minds. And finally, our personal experiences tell us that we are in charge of our choices and actions — we are. Therefore few people have ever stopped to ask, "If I am in charge of my choices and actions, how can it be said that God rules and governs everything great and small?" For people unfamiliar with *providence*, this question points to a fundamental contradiction in the very idea of their freedom and God's absolute governance of everything large and small. Can we claim to be responsible for our actions and yet acknowledge that God's *providence* governs

everything? This is the question we want to examine in the light of numerous biblical statements and illustrations.

If the scope and range of just how *good* God is is revealed in His acts of *creation* and *redemption*, His goodness is just as clearly seen in and through *providence*. Given this assertion, then a) what is providence?, and b) how does providence work? The first question — "What is providence?" — is easy to define, but hard for many people to "digest" because the answer does not fit their perceptions of their own personal experiences. Providence is, nonetheless, biblically understood to be *God's immutable guidance*. How sweeping or broad is God's divine guidance? Does God just guide the "big things" in life, or do the "small things" of life fall under His divine providence as well?

For example, are the words found in Matthew 10:29-30 to be taken literally or figuratively: "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet *not one* of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are *all* numbered" (emphasis added). Does this mean that every duck shot by a hunter, and every bird struck and killed by a car, and every baby bird

tumbled from its nest and killed in a violent storm, and all other birds that live and die of old age are all living out their lives within the framework of God's divine guidance — providence? And the author's head is almost bald. Has God been keeping up with my hair count after every shower?

Are children born with birth defects, or born dead, or born out of wedlock, or born healthy into a Christian home *all* under God's divine guidance? What are we to understand when we read Exodus 4:11: "And the Lord said to him [Moses], 'Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I the Lord?'" These words can seem harsh at first reading. What could God mean when His Word says that He *makes* some people dumb, deaf, and blind? Does the word "makes" in this context imply that God is the "cause" of such defects? No, it does not. Then does it mean that God is so "on top of everything" (in control) that *what He allows to take place* in and through the natural, consequential unfolding of life's experiences is as much a part of His *will* as are those things He actively *causes to happen*? Yes, it is this latter meaning that Scripture would have us understand and appreciate when it points us to *providence*.

Providence embodies both God's *active will*, what He "causes" to happen, and His *permissive will*, what He permits to happen in and through the natural course of things happening in the created order. His *permissive will* is sometimes referred to as His *decretive will* — that which God foreknew would happen with certainty if His creatures were allowed to make their own free choices (within the framework of their nature). This is God's will *permitting* things to happen, *without causing* the "right" and "wrong" or "good" and "bad" things to happen. The *certainty* of these "freely chosen" outcomes is, however, so absolutely *foreknown* by God that from God's side of the "event" they are called *decreed* — fixed; unchangeable; certain to occur; but not caused by God.

Returning to the Exodus 4:11 passage again, when God asks, "Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" God *is not saying* that He has *caused* people to be dumb, deaf, or blind. He is saying to Moses, and us, that He is so much in charge of everything, at all times, that nothing can happen apart from either His causing it to happen or His foreknowing and permitting it to happen. Furthermore, He is glad for all

people to comprehend that He, God, is not ashamed to accept this sovereign responsibility for all of reality. God's *rule* through both His active involvement in the affairs of His image bearers and His permissive allowance of free human choice is probably as clearly demonstrated in Scripture in Acts 2:23 as anywhere. Here we read:

This man [Jesus], delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

God was "in charge" of Christ's crucifixion. God actively led Jesus up to be crucified. But He allowed godless men to exercise their free

... His children come to not only trust His providence, but to find great comfort in it.

will within the confines of their fallen nature, and they crucified the sinless, guiltless, innocent Son of God. This was God's will.

The mystery that is embodied in the doctrine of *providence* is mind-boggling, to be sure. We cannot comprehend such wisdom or grandeur. The greatness of

God's rule is awesome. But His children come to not only trust His *providence*, but to find great comfort in it. They learn that God's *providence* is *good* as they experience the reality found in God's promise made to them in Romans 8:28-29:

*And we know that **God causes all things** to work together for **good** to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He **foreknew**, He also predestined to become conformed to the **image of His Son**, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren* (emphasis added).

The first question, "What is providence?," has been answered.

Providence is God's absolute oversight and control of everything, either by His permission or His causation. But the second question, "How does providence work?," requires considerably more explaining. The answer that follows *mirrors* closely a chapter found in a document prepared by a group of theologians gathered together in England in 1643 and who finished their work in 1649. They were called together by the

English Parliament “... for the settlement of the Government and Liturgy of the Church of England, and for the indicating and clearing of the doctrine of the said Church from false aspersions and interpretations.” A portion of their work contained what is called the “Westminster Confession of Faith” (WCF), and it was accepted and adopted by the English Parliament as the official standard by which the people of England should be guided in their thinking about God and the doctrines embodied in Scripture. Chapter V of the WCF is titled “Of Providence.” The following seven points paraphrase the first three paragraphs of the fifth chapter of the WCF. The paraphrased points are listed below. They are each discussed, explained, and elaborated on immediately following the list.

- 1) It is God who upholds, arranges, directs, and governs all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the smallest, by His wise and holy providence (Hebrews 1:3; Daniel 4:34-35; Psalm 135:6; Acts 17:24-31; Job 38; 39; 40; 41).
- 2) Everything that goes on in creation is “according to God’s infallible fore-knowledge, and the free and

immutable counsel of his own will” (Isaiah 41:23; 44:7-8; 45:21; Proverbs 16:9; 20:24; Ephesians 1:11b).

- 3) Everything that does happen resounds to the praise of His glory, wisdom, power, justice, *goodness*, and mercy (Isaiah 63:14; Ephesians 3:10; Romans 9:17; Genesis 45:7; Psalm 145:7, emphasis added).
- 4) God, the “first cause,” accepts absolute responsibility for *superintending* — causing or allowing — all “second causes.” Second causes are those thing and activities that flow from God’s initial creative acts and all of the “fall-out” that takes place as a result of these subsequent “second cause” activities (Exodus 4:10-11; Matthew 11:4-6; Luke 1:20, 64; John 9:1-3; etc.).
- 5) We know God accepts this responsibility because “*all things come to pass immutably and infallibly*” in “*relation to the fore-knowledge and decree of God*” (Acts 2:23; 3:18; 4:28; Matthew 26:34, 75; Isaiah 46: 5, 10, 11; etc.).
- 6) God has decreed that the *overwhelming* majority of our providential experiences

will be the result of the natural consequences flowing from “second causes”

(Genesis 8:22; Isaiah 10:5-7; Genesis 50:20; Micah 4:11-12; Acts 2:22-23).

- 7) God, in His *providence*, ordinarily makes use of the “second causes” but is free to work with, against, or without the “second causes,” as He wishes (Acts 27:31, 44; Isaiah 55:10; Hosea 1:7; Job 34:10; Romans 4:19-21; II Kings 6:6; Daniel 3:27).

These seven points will now be “unpacked,” for they do not set forth ideas that could be called “everyday reflections on reality.” Reading the passages of Scripture listed with the seven points will help those unfamiliar with the doctrine of *providence* to assimilate the biblical concept more easily.

- 1) It is God who upholds, arranges, directs, and governs all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the smallest, by His wise and holy providence (Hebrews 1:3; Daniel 4:34-35; Psalm 135:6; Acts 17:24-31; Job 38; 39; 40; 41).

Job, the suffering saint in Scripture, certainly believed that what befell him was under the divine control of God — *providence*. That is clear when he said, following the loss of all of his oxen, donkeys, sheep, camels, and seven children — all of his wealth and family, except his wife — “... ‘the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.’ Through all this Job did not sin nor ascribe unseemliness to God” (Job 1:21-22). Even though Job’s horrible losses had occurred at the hands of evil men and the forces of a fallen natural order (tornadic winds), he clearly believed that every loss he experienced in his life was under God’s superintended oversight and control — “the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.”

We also know from the account in Job that God knew that Satan desired to “undo” Job before any of the horrific negative events affecting Job ever occurred. We know this from the following account found in Job 1:7-12:

7 And the Lord said to Satan, “From where do you come?” Then Satan answered the Lord and said, “From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.”

8 And the Lord said to Satan,

*“Have you **set your heart on** My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.” 9 Then Satan answered the Lord, “Does Job fear God for nothing? 10 Hast Thou not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. 11 But **put forth Thy hand** now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse Thee to Thy face.” 12 Then the Lord said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not put forth your hand on him.” So Satan departed from the presence of the Lord (Emphasis added; the phrase bolded in verse 8 is the literal translation of the Hebrew text at this point.).*

It is clear from the text that even Satan, the one fostering evil, is under the superintending limitations placed on him by God. This same point is reinforced in Job 2:1-6 when Satan is once again restricted as to the degree of harm he is allowed to do Job; he may now undermine Job’s health, but he is not allowed to take Job’s

physical life. And again in Luke 22:31-32 we read, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

And King David certainly believed in God’s complete divine rule when he said, “Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Thy book they were all written, the days that were *ordained* for me, when as yet there was not one of them” (Psalm 139:16; emphasis added).

There are those who find it hard to believe that God has this degree of oversight or control over everything because they fear that to hold such a belief would logically require them to have a belief in “determinism” and “fatalism,” which they *rightly reject*, for Scripture teaches neither. This very tension or fear is tackled in the second and third points addressed in the WCF chapter “Of Providence.” The second point maintains:

- 2) Everything that goes on in creation is “according to God’s infallible fore-knowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will” (Isaiah 41:23;

44:7-8; 45:21; Proverbs 16:9; 20:24; Ephesians 1:11b).

God's possessing complete foreknowledge of everything that will happen in the future is troubling to some Christians. Biblical passages like Psalm 139:16; 147:5; Job 14:5; Isaiah 11:2; 40:28; and 49:9-10 attest, however, to the truth that God has indeed known everything that is going to happen in the tomorrows from eternity past. In the language of Isaiah 40:28, God's "understanding is inscrutable." It is beyond human comprehension.

Scripture would have us understand that the possession of "foreknowledge" is clear evidence that its possessor, and its only possessor, is God. For example, in Isaiah 41:22-23 we read, "let them bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place ... that we may know that they are gods." And again in Isaiah 44:7-8 we find, "And who is like Me? ... let them declare to them the things that are coming and the events that are going to take place. Do not tremble and do not be afraid; have I not long since announced it [what is coming] to you and declared it? And *you are my witnesses*. Is there any God beside Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none" (emphasis added).

Scripture attests to God's perfect and complete foreknowledge. The hundreds of accurately and fully fulfilled prophecies in the Scripture attest to God's foreknowledge.

Not only does God perfectly foreknow all that will take place in the future, it is also true that everything that takes place in history is in harmony with the "free and immutable counsel of His own will." This means that God is not only aware of everything that will happen in the future, He is also absolutely willing to *actively* and *permissively* superintend everything that is *ordained* (foreknown and certain) to take place in the future. God knows the natural consequences, or fallout, of all thoughts and actions, and He is free to intervene by actively acting in the situation or to be an observer and let the natural fallout take place without intervening. Whichever course God chooses, the choice reflects His governing will and perfect wisdom.

The third point made in the "Of Providence" chapter of the WCF goes something like this:

- 3) Everything that does happen resounds to the praise of His glory, wisdom, power, justice, *goodness*, and mercy

(Isaiah 63:14; Ephesians 3:10; Romans 9:17; Genesis 45:7; Psalm 145:7, emphasis added).

The glory of God's *goodness* is portrayed through His governance by providence. Indeed, the glory or awesome weight and notability of His goodness are displayed in and through His divine guidance of every event and thing in the created order, including the *free* activity of His image bearers. God's providence or divine guidance can only be characterized as being absolutely *good* in so far as it relates to His

adopted children — those given to Christ before times eternal and united with Him in their temporal and eternal life. Those who reject Christ will finally face His justice and judgment and from their perspective that will not be *good*. The issue of God's applied justice to the unrighteous is not, however, the focus of the discussion here.

One may still object to so encompassing a statement, "everything ... resounds to the praise of His [attributes]," when reflecting on the suffering of some of God's children. That, however, is to confuse comfort, pleasure, and being at ease with the true goodness of God that is

manifested in His transforming His adopted children into the likeness of Christ. This is the good news spelled out in Romans 8:28-29 that was quoted just a couple of pages earlier — "And we know that God causes all things to work together for *good* ..." (emphasis added). God's astounding goodness is manifested in His work to conform His children to the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ (v. 29). There is really no greater gift God can bestow upon His children, for to become like Christ embodies within it the ability to love God unfailingly with their entire being and to

... hardships are but instruments of grace in the hands of the great Carpenter and Physician.

love other people even as Christ loves them. If the hardships of life can be used by God to produce such an "end," then the hardships are but instruments of *grace* in the hands of the great Carpenter and Physician. This reality is reinforced in the Apostle Paul's statement, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18; also see II Corinthians 4:16-17; I Peter 4:13).

The fourth and fifth points made in “Of Providence” in the WCF are:

- 4) God, the “first cause,” accepts absolute responsibility for *superintending* — causing or allowing — all “second causes.” Second causes are those thing and activities that flow from God’s initial creative acts and all of the “fall-out” that takes place as a result of these subsequent “second cause” activities (Exodus 4:10-11; Matthew 11:4-6; Luke 1:20, 64; John 9:1-3; etc.).

First, God was before all other “causes” — before people were created and given choices and actions to perform; before the sun, wind, rain, and all other natural forces were created; etc. — and He is therefore rightfully to be considered the “first cause.”

Second, God’s accepting the superintending responsibility of the “second cause” consequences in our lives, even when He does not cause a particular event or consequence to occur, is beautifully illustrated in John 9:1-3. In the event recorded for us there, Jesus’ disciples, upon seeing a man who was born

blind, wondered if the man was blind because of his parents’ sin or because he had sinned. Many people even today make a direct connection in their mind between a “bad experience” and their previous “inappropriate conduct” — they think, “I am being punished.” Other people interpret “unfortunate circumstances” as being simply random, chance events without any connection to a “god” of any type. But Jesus told His disciples, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him.” Jesus’ answer makes it clear that He understood that the man was born blind *because God permitted it in order to display God’s subsequent work in the man that would bring glory to Himself*. Doesn’t Christ’s understanding give us the correct interpretation of such a reality? Certainly! God has an infinitely wise purpose behind everything He either does or allows.

Furthermore, the truth of this point is reinforced by the fact that:

- 5) We know God accepts this responsibility because “*all things come to pass immutably and infallibly*” in “*relation to the fore-knowledge and decree of*

God” (Acts 2:23; 3:18; 4:28; Matthew 26:34, 75; Isaiah 46: 5, 10, 11; etc.).

This means that in God’s mind He already knows today all that will take place in every tomorrow and that what is going to take place tomorrow is “immutably” set to take place. And when it does take place it will be “infallibly” realized in every detail as God foreknew it would, as *He decreed it would*. Wow! But does this not point to “determinism” and “fatalism?” No, it does not. God’s perfect foreknowledge regarding the *free choices* humans make does not turn our free choices into fatalistic choices. It simply points to God’s transcendent omniscient character that is inscrutable — beyond our ability to comprehend (Isaiah 40:28; Psalm 147:5; Romans 11:33).

People who have encountered the above revelation regarding God have even done silly things like changing their choices at the last minute in order to show those of us who hold such beliefs that they are capable of throwing God “off of the track.” They fail to realize that God knows their *nature* and *character* so completely that He even foreknew they would act in such a manner, and they reveal their attitude

of wanting to renounce His immutable foreknowledge and superintending oversight — an impossibility.

And what is entailed in the idea that God “decrees” what takes place in our lives? What does it mean that something is decreed? It means the thing is irreversibly necessitated to happen or take place. What is meant by “necessitated to happen?” Its certainty of taking place is assured by the will of God — by either His involved active will or His permissive decretive will. But regardless of whether or not it happens under the umbrella of God’s active or His permissive will, it will happen immutably and infallibly. And His active and His permissive will are both to be understood as the immutable will of God.

The way one views this fifth point regarding God’s *providence* in many ways determines the “size” of their God and the degree of “comfort” they have in every circumstance of life. To believe that God foreknows and superintends every detail of our lives results in our having a perception of an “awesome and majestic God.” To believe that God does not have perfect foreknowledge and control of everything before seemingly

random events occur leaves us with a God that can be caught off guard and a God who needs to regain control after the occurrence of an event. This represents in our minds a “smaller God” who resembles our own limited nature. The smaller God could even make a mistake in allowing certain things to occur in our lives. We could come to believe that God was wrong when He allowed event XYZ to hurt us. There is no comfort in that.

Indeed, resentment or bitterness may result. Those who cling to the larger understanding of God have a basis for trusting in His wisdom and goodness in the midst of suffering and persecution. They know He is *good* and will use all events for their *good*.

The sixth point to be made regarding *providence* is:

- 6) God has decreed that the *overwhelming* majority of our providential experiences will be the result of the natural consequences flowing from “second causes” (Genesis 8:22; Isaiah 10:5-7; Genesis 50:20; Micah 4:11-12; Acts 2:22-23).

God has determined (decreed; ordered; fixed in His own mind)

that our life’s experiences should, *for the most part*, flow from those things that occur in and around us in the realm of “second causes” — created things that can act and/or produce consequences independent of God’s continuing causative activity. For example, if a person chooses, makes a *free choice*, to climb a cherry tree and pick and eat some ripe cherries,

They know He is good and will use all events for their good.

she has experienced the joys, or difficulties, associated with climbing the tree and eating the cherries. But if she falls out of the tree while climbing or sitting in the tree and breaks her arm, she has experienced a *cause and effect* consequence of her free choice to climb the tree to eat the cherries: a broken arm. Breaking an arm is a *providential* experience, in this case, an experience God foreknew and allowed but did not cause.

Could God have prevented the accident described above? Certainly He could have by intervening — actively becoming involved — in either the circumstances surrounding the decision to climb the tree or in the conduct involved in the actual climbing of the tree. But typically God does not actively involve

Himself in such ongoing daily affairs in our lives — causing or preventing “second cause” consequences from happening.

The question just raised and answered leads us to look at the seventh and final aspect of God’s ordained *providence*.

- 7) God, in His *providence*, ordinarily makes use of the “second causes” but is free to work with, against, or without the “second causes,” as He wishes (Acts 27:31, 44; Isaiah 55:10; Hosea 1:7; Job 34:10; Romans 4:19-21; II Kings 6:6; Daniel 3:27).

This means simply that God ordinarily allows the “fallout” from the various “second causes” — nature, the behavior of subhuman creatures, and human choices — to happen without His intervention and to have their effect produce their consequences on our lives. For example, God is not likely to intervene in our decision to go to a concert where we will contract the flu. Or He is not likely to help us achieve a higher score on an exam than our work in preparation for the exam warrants. And He is not going to tell us whom to marry, apart from

the general instruction to marry “only in the Lord” — we cannot blame God for a bad marriage (I Corinthians 7:39). And He will never tell you to divorce your spouse, for He hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). God has promised to be with us in the midst of life and its many repercussions, but He has not promised to keep us from adversity, suffering, and sorrows.

God is at the same time free to act against, above, or outside of the forces of nature and to protect an individual from certain death in a flood through a miracle if He chooses to do so, for example. God is free to set aside the very laws of nature He created if He wants to. He did this when Christ turned the water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana (John 2:6-10). God is not constrained to work in and through the normal effects of the “second causes.” We are not to “test” God, however, by expecting Him to work outside of the normal forces set into motion within the framework of the “second causes” by the ordinary behavior or fallout of the “second causes,” but He is able to do so whenever He might choose to.

God’s direct and active involvement in His children’s lives is typically limited to His acts of regeneration and sanctification (maturing) of those persons the

Father gives to His Son (John 6:37, 39; Philippians 1:6; 2:13; I Corinthians 12:7-11). God generally does not involve Himself (actively engage) in the day-to-day decisions of either His people or those who reject His Lordship over their lives. God directs His children by altering their world/lifeview that leads them to make “new” free choices rather than “old” free choices. He alters His children’s desires by renovating their hearts so that they grow in a way that finds them desiring what God desires. God draws His children to Himself so they want more and more to do His revealed will; their will begins to reflect His will. But this transformation is first and foremost a heart transformation that overflows into every other area of life.

The mind-boggling aspect of all of this comes when we encounter the reality that God is capable of knowing the future infallibly. Scripture attests to this reality. The prophetic words in the Old Testament that have been fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ testify to this reality. And by faith Christians have believed that this reflects the reality of the Triune God. To deny God’s foreknowledge is to make Him in our own mutable and limited likeness.

We cannot comprehend how God can know today the free choices we will make tomorrow. But the reality is that He knows us that well. He made us. He knows our every like and dislike. He knows us so thoroughly that He knows how we will react to every stimulus we encounter. And what we encounter is not only derived from the physical elements that surround us and act upon us, but we are also subject to the “spiritual forces” that are at work in the world — both the Divine and the demonic. Immediately after the fall of our first parents, God put enmity between the subsequent children of light and the children of darkness — the children of God and the children of the devil (Genesis 3:14-15). The struggle between righteousness and unrighteousness is an ongoing battle. The Apostle Paul points out the reality that the children of God “struggle ... against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” and not simply against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12). God’s providence is at work and ruling in the midst of all of this.

It is God’s providence (divine guidance) and administration in and with the diverse and complex “second causes” in the mixture of the natural order and human

activity that is incomprehensible to the human mind. We cannot fathom it! This reality leaves us with three alternatives. We can simply ignore and refuse to think about the reality of God's providence in our lives; we can deny His providence in everything and worship a "small" God; or we can let the wonder of His awesome rule, through providence, elevate our awe for Him so that we can worship a "very large" God who transcends our ability to fully comprehend just how glorious He is.

The historic and orthodox position of the church has been that God rules over and through every event, thing, and person in the created order through His superintended providence. Every hair is numbered. No sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of the Lord. And to conform His children more and more into the likeness of Christ He will use every event and action that "touches" them.

The Westminster Confession of Faith says all that has been said above about the *providence* of God in the following way:

- I. God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things,

from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

- II. Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; yet by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

- III. God in his ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.

What are we to conclude from this discussion regarding the *providence* of God? The children of God can certainly conclude that God's providence is indeed *good*. And they are able to affirm this because God has promised, and He always keeps His promises, that He will use everything that happens to His people and employ it to their benefit — use the events of providence to conform

them to the likeness of Christ. Is there any greater *good* that God could bestow upon His people than to make them more and more like His Son? No, there is not! Therefore the Christian can conclude that God's *goodness* is profoundly revealed to them through *providence*.

Conclusion

"And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone'" (Luke 18:19). Surely we can understand better now why Christ told the rich young ruler that *no one* is good except God alone. Even if we should forget for a moment our sin nature and should happen to act in a manner that seems "good" at the time, could such a person ever be rightfully thought of as being a good person in the light of what we have just contemplated regarding the basis upon which we know that God is good?

It is appropriate to be grateful when we see someone emulating the goodness of God. It is appropriate to thank God, and them, for their goodness. This is so because a "good" act either reveals God's common grace at work in our midst or the fruit of God's redemptive and maturing work in the life of a believer. And for this we should be grateful. But

in and of ourselves, "there is none righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10; Psalm 14:3). Our own righteousness is no righteousness at all when it is contrasted with the righteousness of God. As true as all of this is, however, we are nevertheless to strive to be *good* like Christ. God desires to impart His character of being *good* to His children.

We are to emulate Christ in all that we do while confessing our need for His work *in* us if we are to accomplish anything "good." Christ made this absolutely clear when He said to His disciples on the night He was betrayed:

Abide in Me, and I in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing (John 15:4-5, emphasis added).

We are not good and cannot be good in and of ourselves; we are accounted as good and can to a degree be good in Christ. As Christ's righteousness is imputed to us through our faith in His having given His *good* life for our

unholy lives, so His goodness is imputed to us and we are actually gradually being transformed into people with the capacity to be good to a greater degree as God does His renovating work in our lives. We are to understand this in the same way we understand God's revelation, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (I Peter 1:16). These are *directional* concepts. They point us in the direction God is moving us as we abide in Him. God is moving us toward holiness and *goodness* as He renovates us, even though its completion will only take place when we are glorified after our earthly life has been concluded.

But our *desire* to know God better, our *desire* to be with Him more, our *desire* to fellowship with Him can surely only increase as we stop and contemplate God's *goodness* as it is displayed before us through His acts of *creation*, *redemption*, and *providence*. The more we see, smell, touch, taste, and hear God's creation and the benefits we derive from it, surely over time we will come to *desire* the Creator more than the benefits derived from what He has created. To be awestruck by the beauty of any aspect of God's creation is a wonderful human experience, but even more wonderful is the One

capable of both creating the awe-inspiring beauty and those capable of being awe inspired. There are smells we desire to encounter; there are tastes we seek on certain occasions; there are sounds we can hardly wait to hear; and there are things we delight in holding and touching. God's creation clearly declares His *goodness*, and His children *desire* Him because of the benefits they derive from His beneficence poured out upon them through what He has created.

As God's children grow to become more like Him, though, they also begin to desire to see to it that His good creation is used to meet the true needs of all of God's image bearers. His good creation takes on a meaning that transcends the mere selfish enjoyment of

***God is moving us toward
holiness and goodness as
He renovates us ...***

its benefits. Christians discover a developing *desire* to share the created goodness with others as well. It is through this process that we begin to emulate God's goodness — we grow in our *desire* to share what God has shared with us.

The Holy Spirit's redemptive work in the life of a person,

however, becomes an even stronger activator generating an even more powerful *desire* to know and be in fellowship with God than even the recognition of His goodness as it is realized in and through His acts of creation. As the Holy Spirit makes known to us the reality of and the depth and pervasiveness of our sin nature — just how ungodly we are — and seemingly almost simultaneously immerses us in the reality of God’s mercy and grace associated with the sacrificial death of Christ who bore the wrath of God the Father in our place, and Who applies Christ’s righteousness to us by creating and nurturing in us the very *faith* necessary to receive the benefits flowing from Christ’s substitutionary death, our *desire* for Christ increases enormously. When we become acutely aware of our fallen and depraved “old nature,” we want the righteousness of Christ all the more (Matthew 5:6). Our recognized “need” for Him heightens greatly our *desire* for Him.

And does not our own growing awareness of God’s *goodness* poured out upon us through His saving us move us to want to share His *goodness* with those who have not yet surrendered their lives to Christ so that they may also come to enjoy

God’s *goodness* poured out on all who will invite Christ into their lives to become their Lord and Savior? Is this not the motivating force behind all evangelism that takes place in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ? Can something that is so sweet to God’s children be kept a secret by them? Surely not! The precious gift of the “good news” is freely given, and those who truly receive it will not want to hoard it, but share it.

Christ’s healing of the Gergasene demonic who had lived in the tombs and terrorized everyone who came near him set in motion events that reveal God’s desire for us to share the “good news” of Christ’s work with others — “And as He [Jesus] was getting into the boat [to go away], the man who had been demon possessed was entreating Him that he might be with Him, and He did not let him, but He said to him, ‘Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how he had mercy on you’” (Mark 5:18-19).

Realizing that God governs every aspect of our lives through what we theologically refer to as “providence” also generates within us a great *desire* for the nearness of God. The awareness of our dependency upon Him; the understanding that it is His will

that is always best; and the tests and trials His children encounter in life are there to move them to *desire* His presence at all times. These things all stimulate those that are redeemed to *desire* to be more like Him. Even as I write this, though, my mind turns to the son of a good Christian friend of mine who is in the hospital today having had his right leg amputated just below the knee as a result of a motorcycle accident that occurred less than 60 hours ago. And this young amputee has yet to embrace Christ. How will this providential event — “hit and run” motorcycle accident — impact his understanding of God? Will he become bitter and resent a God who would allow such a thing to happen to him? Will he reflect on the fact that he was not killed and separated from any further opportunity to embrace Christ as his savior and thereby become eternally grateful? Will he become grateful that he did not suffer brain damage? Will he be grateful that he did not become a quadriplegic, as did my youngest son in a recreational vehicle accident a number of years ago? What will the outcome be? The answer rests in the hands of God. Will God, the “first cause,” act to redeem this young man, or will God allow the reality of “second causes” to play

out their consequences apart from His redemptive intervention? Since no one deserves God’s mercy and grace, whatever the outcome, God is and will be eternally *good*.

It is God who has created within us the capacity to *desire* Him, the focus of several of the preceding paragraphs. And God has given us the capacity to *desire* Him in order that He might satisfy the desires He has created, for they are the motivational channels employed by God when He undertakes the task of renovating the distorted images of His fallen children back *into the likeness of Christ* — God’s *desire* for those whom He adopts.

God’s satisfying the *God-oriented* desires of His children produces within them a true *love* for Him. The love of God grows bright when the *desire for God* is great. The love for God grows dim when the desire for God is replaced by a *desire for the benefits* that are derived from God. The derived benefits can all too quickly become the “idols” we serve. We can all too readily want the things created more than the Creator. We can want the salvation Christ offers but quickly ignore His lordship over us. We can enjoy the pleasures of life, but find ourselves complaining when confronted with the trials and sufferings that accompany life.

The appropriate God-oriented *desire* that matures into a genuine *love* of God is greatly assisted in its maintenance by its being yoked to a corresponding amount of *humility*. Have you ever thought about how often God calls us to humble ourselves before him? He frequently does so. For example, in James 4:10 we read, “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.” (Also see Matthew 18:4; 23:12; I Peter 5:5-6; Exodus 10:3; II Chronicles 7:14; 34:27; etc.) And how do we humble ourselves? By *remembering* our true nature with its accompanying propensity toward self-centeredness; by *remembering* our status before God and the mercy and grace bound up in our precious relationship with Him; and by *remembering* our constant need for God’s sanctifying work in our lives. These and other *remembrances* help to keep us humble.

People who consciously associate the innumerable benefits they derive from the created order with the Creator and who love the Triune God because they know He has redeemed them from the kingdom of Satan are *motivated to serve Him*. And what does it mean to serve God? The foremost model we can look to in answering

this question is, of course, Christ. He told us, “The Son of Man [Christ] did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). And as a guide to help His disciples (and all of His people) understand how He intended them to serve, He said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (John 13:34). *The standard by which God’s children are to assess their service, their response to the goodness of God poured out upon them through His creation, redemption, and providence, is their commitment of their lives to discerning and following the revealed will of God* — to be Christlike in their relationships with their spouses, children, parents, extended family members, employers, employees, neighbors, enemies, strangers, friends, and all who are over them in positions of public authority.

Let us take comfort in the fact that we are not left alone to fulfill the exceedingly high calling of Christ set forth in the preceding paragraph. Indeed, the call is beyond our ability to achieve it in our own strength. We are encouraged, however, by the Word of God as we read, “He who began a good work in you will perfect it

until the day of Christ Jesus,” and “... for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 1:6; 2:13). God will see that we are enabled to live by faith and to serve Christ in a manner that is acceptable to Him. We strive; He enables; and all of the glorious results are accredited to His work on our behalf as we enjoy His *goodness* and grow in our ability to emulate Him.

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ENDNOTES

¹God’s *aseity* is the biblical doctrine attesting to God’s absolute independence from all that is external to Himself. God has been eternally complete within the fellowship of the Trinity and *did not create from a need of any type*. Read Isaiah 40:6-7, 10, 15, 17; Job 22:2-3; Isaiah 48:9, 11.

²S. Charnock, *The existence and attributes of God, Vol. II*, Discourse XII. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996, p. 219.

³There is a sense in which this “speculation” concerning which attribute of God is most fundamental, or at the core of His decision to create, is surreal, for God’s attributes are not divisible into separated characteristics. God is a holistic, unified, indivisible Spirit. Why then do that which is acknowledged from the start to be

impossible to do? Because, while God humbled Isaiah by showing him His holiness (Isaiah 6:3-7) and Job by circumcising the eyes of his heart so he could see God’s glory (Job 42:1-6), most of God’s children are sanctified more slowly through the repeated failures in their lives. These failures are tended to by God’s applied goodness, experientially received in its many forms. God’s goodness is applied to our lives to heal us and further transform us into the very likeness of Christ (Romans 8:28-29). Oh, what love!

⁴Through God’s “revealed plan of redemption and judgment” — special revelation — we are made aware that eternal life with God, or eternal life separated from God, are also part of His eternal plans.

⁵The issues associated with reconciling the declaration that creation reveals the goodness of God with the reality of earthquakes, hurricanes, cancer, and a host of other “not so good” things associated with creation (and its fall — Romans 8:18-23) transcend the work of this paper.

However, it is an important subject embodied in any thorough discussion on God’s sovereign rule, even over suffering and evil.

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