

The Providence of God

Spring Lecture

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I'd like to welcome you all here tonight on behalf of the Evangelism Committee at Peace Protestant Reformed Church. We are delighted to have Reverend Langerak here tonight to speak to us about the providence of God and I'm going to read now Psalm 29, Psalter 76 is based on Psalm 29., and then open with prayer. Psalm 29,

1 Give unto the LORD, O ye mighty, give unto the LORD glory and strength. 2 Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness. 3 The voice of the LORD is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth: the LORD is upon many waters. 4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. 5 The voice of the LORD breaketh the cedars; yea, the LORD breaketh the cedars of Lebanon. 6 He maketh them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion like a young unicorn. 7 The voice of the LORD divideth the flames of fire. 8 The voice of the LORD shaketh the wilderness; the LORD shaketh the wilderness of Kadesh. 9 The voice of the LORD maketh the hinds to calve, and discovereth the forests: and in his temple doth every one speak of his glory. 10 The LORD sitteth upon the flood; yea, the LORD sitteth King for ever. 11 The LORD will give strength unto his people; the LORD will bless his people with peace.

Let's open with a word of prayer.

O Jehovah, we seek thy blessing tonight at the beginning of this night together for thou art the eternal God, I am that I am, and there is no one like unto thee. We seek tonight to glorify thee as the God of creation and the Almighty God of Providence. We confess that thou dost continue to uphold and govern all the things that thou hast made and that thou dost do so for the good of thy church. Bless us with comfort and peace as we consider this beautiful truth tonight. Bless Reverend Langerak as he opens up thy word unto us, that he may have a ready mind and may be able to speak clearly thy word, and we pray, Father, that thou wilt knit that word unto our hearts that we may confess thy faith, the truth that we cannot see by sight that all things work together for the good of thy people whom thou hast ordained unto eternal life and called by thy Gospel to life. We pray, Father, that thou wilt bless the efforts of the Evangelism Committee tonight and in other

in other works that the committee does. We pray, Father, that the truth of the Gospel may be spread throughout the world and that as a congregation we may be used to gain others unto Jesus Christ as thy instruments in thy hand. And bless thy churches everywhere who take up that work and we pray, Father, that thy kingdom make be built up and all things prepared for the coming again of Jesus Christ even as we are assured by thy word, that thou art controlling all things now to lead to that goal which is coming. Forgive our sins and hear us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

We are pleased tonight that Reverend Langerak, minister of the Crete Protestant Reformed Church is here to speak to us about the providence of God, and with no further introduction, Reverend Langerak.

Greetings to all of you this evening. The subject for tonight's lecture is the truth of the providence of God. In his fine essay on the providence of God, the Presbyterian theologian, Benjamin Warfield, made mention of the favorite saying of a housewife who was familiar with him with regard to the providence of God. That housewife was fond of saying, "We will not be robbed of God's providence." That quotation and its source, a housewife, are important for our consideration of providence tonight.

First of all, the saying of that housewife, "We will not be robbed of God's providence," makes clear that there are real threats existing in the ecclesiastical world with regard to God's providence, threats that threaten to take away the church's confession of God's providence. That threat to providence is old. That threat was present in Israel, the nation of Israel in the wilderness when in their difficult situation, they tempted God saying, "Is God among us or not?" In the present day, there are similarly threats to God's providence. The Dutch Reformed theologian, Berkouwer, called the situation in the church in his day, the 50s, with regard to the confession of providence a crisis, and we may disagree with Berkouwer's analysis of that crisis in the confession of providence, an analysis which he attributes, the crisis in providence, to the scientific mind that no longer readily confesses the minute control of God in the world; that analysis does not reckon with the truth that no man ancient or modern, scientific or superstitious, ever confesses the providence of God apart from God's gift of faith. But with Berkouwer's analysis that there is a crisis with regard to the confession of providence, we may agree.

Today especially if there are severe threats to the church's and to the believer's confession of providence. There is the threat of the rank heresy known as open theism. Open theism is the heretical worldview that teaches that God is not sovereign over the events that are dependent upon the decisions of man. That rank heresy comes very close to Reformed churches in a certain view of prayer in which view of prayer, prayer is viewed as changing God. There the rank heresy of open theism threatens the church's view of providence. There is the radical pantheism of process theology which teaches that God is not separate from the world and above the world but in the world and changes with the world. There is also a reassertion of Arminian theology. Arminian theology is the mother of those two rank heresies of open theism and process theology because Arminianism itself denies God's sovereignty in the world by denying that the salvation of sinners is dependent on God's choice.

The list of those threats makes no mention of the serious threat to the church's confession of the doctrine of providence by the wholesale acceptance of evolutionary theory in Reformed churches. Virtually no North American Reformed or Presbyterian denomination is immune from the cancer of evolution. Evolution is a massive assault on God's providence and therefore a threat to the church's comfort in this world. Where evolution is taught, despair sets in in the churches. That's because evolution denies creation and creation and providence are so tightly connected that to deny one is to deny the other. Evolution is furthermore a threat to the church's confession of providence because evolution enthrones chance, providence's mortal foe in the throne of the universe attributing all kinds of change and development in the world not to God but to chance.

The doctrine of providence, then, is worthy of a fresh defense because there are forces old and new that threaten the church and believer's confession of providence. If you or I have faced any of these threats in your own church or denomination, or you are aware of these threats, that will make the saying of that housewife very important. It will be our conviction, "We will not be robbed of God's providence," not by false doctrine. But secondly, the saying of that housewife expressed her conviction about the importance of providence in her confession of faith. To have that doctrine taken away is to be robbed. If you have some of your possessions taken away, that's to be robbed of that which is yours and dear to you in an earthly way. If to have possessions taken away is robbery, to have one of the dearest parts of the believer's confession of faith in the world taken away is the grossest kind of robbery. Providence is precious. It's precious because it is the rock-solid foundation of the believer's comfort in this changing world. To lose the doctrine is to lose the comfort. To lose the comfort is to be thrown back upon the hopelessness, the despair and the misery of the natural man.

Third, that quote by that housewife, "We will not be robbed of God's providence," is important because it was the confession of a housewife. Read just about any book on providence with some notable exceptions, and it will consist of a kind of scholarly debate, mostly friendly, among philosophers who are loosely connected with the church of Jesus Christ, who do little or no preaching or pastoral work among the people of Jesus Christ, and who serve in institutions of higher learning that have very little connection to the church of Jesus Christ, so that providence is merely a doctrine to be aridly debated in the ivory tower among theologians. Providence is not the possession of theologians or philosophers who can debate endlessly about the intricacies of God's relationship to the world like the medieval theologians debated about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Providence is the believer's confession. It's the believer's confession who is not isolated from the sufferings of the world, who is not blissfully unaware of the pain that attends life in this world, and who doesn't merely acquiesce in the sufferings of this world with some grim stoicism but submits by faith to God's dealing with him or her by their hand in this world. They are believers who in their daily lives whether as mothers or bricklayers, whether as truck drivers or housewives who have crying children, who have sick loved ones, who experience death and loss, crying and grief of spirit over a host of troubles in the world, and who stand in those troubles and with uplifted head confess that they believe in a sovereign God who will turn all those evils to their profit and the eternal

salvation of his church. If we know the severe Job-like temptation to question God's dealings with us in the world, it will be our confession too, that we will not be robbed of God's providence.

There are many things that I could say tonight with regard to providence. There are many things that I will not say due to a lack of time. I will say nothing about miracles which I regret because those miracles are intimately connected with God's providence as signs of the amazing grace of God whereby he will lift the entire creation fallen in sin and under the curse to the height of heavenly glory in Christ Jesus. But let us tonight set ourselves the task to treat the chief points with regard to the church's confession of the doctrine of providence, that we too may say, "We will not be robbed of this precious doctrine."

Providence as a doctrine has been part of the believer's confession of faith from the beginning. As far as the church is concerned, that is the New Testament church is concerned, the doctrine of providence has enjoyed virtually unchallenged unanimity. There were, of course, the heretical oddities of Marcion, the ancient heretic who taught that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New Testament, and that the God of the Old Testament was responsible for all the evils and the God of the New Testament was the God and Father of Jesus Christ, and he was condemned by the early New Testament church. There was the dualism of the heretical sect known as the Manichaees who taught that there was in the world a titanic struggle between the forces of evil and the forces of good, neither sovereign and the outcome in doubt, a teaching which rears its ugly head again today in theologians who deny God's sovereignty over evil. Any denial of God's sovereignty over evil is a reappearance of the ancient heresy of Manichaeism. There was also the liberalism at the time of the Reformation of the Socinians who denied that God also was sovereign over evil. But apart from those, in the main the church confessed with one voice God is sovereign, God is sovereign over all things, God is sovereign over my life, God is sovereign over evil.

In the Old Testament, the church confessed that, Enoch preached it, Noah lived in light of it and built an ark to the saving of his house. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived in their tents trusting that God would suffer no men to do them harm. It stands that the doctrine of providence at the heart of the monumental treatment of the providence of God in the book of Job. The Psalms ring from beginning to end with the church's songs extolling the providence of God. Jesus in his own earthly ministry taught his disciples that God feeds the ravens, clothes the lilies, knows the hairs of our head, when one sparrow falls to the ground, that he cares for believers.

The church at that time of the apostles in the face of their own suffering in Acts 4:27 and 28 with regard especially to the persecution that they endured, confessed God's sovereignty, his providence in the world. Augustine gave classic expression to the doctrine of providence in "The City of God," his monumental treatment of God's dealings in the world with his church and in the kingdoms of men. And with the church of all ages, the Reformed faith expresses clearly God's providence outstandingly in the Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 1, 9 and 10, and in the Belgic Confession, Article 13.

That confession that the church of all ages makes of the providence of God is part of the church's confession of the doctrine of God. The Heidelberg Catechism when it teaches us the Reformed faith with regard to providence, does not teach that doctrine abstractly but it teaches that doctrine in harmony with the church of all ages and the churches of all ages confess that in the Apostles' Creed when she said, "We believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." Because the church confessed that there is a God, a God who is a Father and who made the world, the church confessed with that that there is also a God of providence. In that confession then of providence being part of the doctrine of God, makes the confession of providence a confession of faith. It follows from faith's knowledge of God, God especially as a Father, no one confesses providence apart from God's gift of faith. The natural man whether scientific or superstitious, the natural man whether ancient or modern, his carnal mind is enmity against God and therefore, too, against the confession of God's providence in the world, and it's that confession of providence as a confession of God's fatherhood in the world that is at the essence of the church's understanding of providence. Because she confessed that the Triune God is a Father, a Father not only in himself but a Father with respect to the world, a world that he brought forth by his own power, therefore also she confesses that as a good Father, he cares for the world. The church never intended by that that God as a Father who gave existence to the world and therefore that he cares for the world, the church never intended by that that God is the Father of every single human being in the world, that God takes care of every single human being in love as a Father, but rather the world is his and as his, he cares for it. It's that care of God as a Father for his world that the church intended to express by the word providence.

That understanding of providence is important, that it is the confession of or part of the confession of God. A denial of providence in any form whether by Arminianism or by evolutionism or by the rank heresies of open theism or process theology, is a denial of God. That is finally what two debating theologians had to say to one another. As these two theologians were debating with regard to the providence of God, one defending the classic expression of God's providence and the other denying it, the one who denied it said we have two different Gods. That is what that Presbyterian theologian, Benjamin Warfield, meant when he said about the confession of providence, it is part of a consistent theism. To say I believe in God, to say that I believe in the God and Father of Jesus Christ, is to say I believe in the God of providence. To deny providence is to deny that God.

What then do we mean by God's providence? Providence as a word simply means to see in advance, and if we take the word in its original meaning, in literal meaning, it is wholly unsatisfactory to express what the Reformed faith means by the doctrine of providence. Providence is not God's merely seeing in advance. Providence is not God seeing in advance what the world and how the world autonomous or semi autonomous from him develops, and then God responding either to human beings or to developments in the world. God's relationship to the world isn't like that of a man to winter, that man sees winter is coming and so makes provision for winter. Providence then is a theological term. It's a theological term like the term Trinity into which the church injects the doctrinal content of Scripture. By the word "providence" we mean what Scripture and the

Reformed faith teaches as the doctrinal content of providence, and by providence then we mean the almighty and everywhere present power of God whereby he upholds and governs all things according to his eternal counsel. Providence is God as God upholds, governs and directs all things, and providence is closely connected with God's counsel.

Providence is, first of all, God's upholding. The Reformed Creed in the Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 10 says it's his hand, and so we may conceive of God's providence as his hand, as that hand keeps up in their existence everything in the world. God gave to everything in the world: to the devil, to wicked men, to angels and to his elect saints, to the lion and to the beast. God gave all things their existence. He did that at the beginning. His providence is his power, his hand to uphold all things. And providence, secondly, is his government by his hand. He not only upholds those things with his hand but he turns them and governs them whithersoever he wills by that same hand so that he steers everything how he desires. In those two parts of providence, God's upholding of everything and God's directing of everything can't be separated from his decree. Providence is God's decree for all things, a decree according to which he upholds and according to which he governs all those things. God knows all things that will be not because he sees in advance how the world or man will develop, but God knows all things that will be because he decreed it and they come to pass as he decreed by his governing and directing.

Included then in the doctrine of providence is the goal that God decreed. No one can speak of providence and God's upholding and governing all things without speaking of the goal to which God governs and directs all things. Scripture speaks specifically about God's goal of all things in Ephesians 1:9 and 10, "Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him." Christ and the gathering up of all things in Christ is the mystery of the will of God, that is, the goal of God's eternal will for which he makes all things and according to which he directs all things. The goal of God in the world, then, is not the building of a good and a godly culture apart from Christ, the goal of God in the world is not some common grace purpose whereby God will develop that godly culture in the world apart from Jesus Christ, but the goal of God in the world is one: Jesus Christ and the wrapping up of all things in him.

Here too we see, then, that included in this providence of God because providence is his counsel, is the eternal destinies of all men. We must see the Arminian doctrine that teaches that the salvation of men is dependent upon the sovereign choice of those men to choose for God or to open their heart to Jesus Christ, we must see that as a massive assault on the providence of God and it can be proved historically, it can be proved by the admission of the theologians themselves that those who now teach in the world today that God is not sovereign over all things, that he does not direct men and that he's open to the input of men and that he changes his mind according to the desires of men, the theology known as open theism, that that was directly from Arminianism. But Arminianism denies God's providence by removing from the control of God the eternal destiny of men, angels

and devils. They deny, then, that a huge part of the goings on in the world, that is the salvation or the damnation of sinners, is not the responsibility of God but is the responsibility of man who chooses or rejects God.

Over against that, the Reformed faith confesses that as part of God's decree of providence is his decree respecting the sovereign choice appointing some person to salvation in Christ and his sovereign choice appointing some persons to damnation apart from Jesus Christ. And now too, apply that truth to the truth of God's providence as his upholding and governing all things in the world. If he upholds and governs all things by his counsel and included in that counsel is the destinies of men, his upholding in the world, his dealings with men in the world, are likewise in harmony with that eternal decree regarding the destinies of those men. God not only appoints them but now in the world he deals with those men and brings them to their destiny by all sorts of means whether good or bad.

Here the Reformed confession of providence rejects the error of common grace that was adopted by the Christian Reformed Synod of 1924 and which is espoused far and wide as the majority opinion among those who profess to be Reformed by teaching that, that teaches that God in his dealings with men in the world does not deal with those men according to his eternal appointment of them to salvation or damnation but deals with all men equally and favorably, showering upon them his common grace in the form of the good earthly gifts of creation, by that common grace mitigating the depravity of those men and allowing them to do much good, especially to build a good culture that's pleasing to God and that he smiles upon with more common grace blessings, a teaching by which they also teach that God in the preaching of the Gospel is favorable to all those men upon whom he showers those common grace blessings and expresses his desire to save them. Against that teaching, the Reformed faith confesses that God does nothing in the world apart from his decree, the decree appointing men to their destinies, so that in his dealings with all men in the world providentially, upholding wicked men, sending them rain and sunshine, upholding the righteous and sending them drought and famine, but in all his dealings of men he does that according to his decree, so that his favor rests upon his people all their days. He comforts them with peace and he says no peace to the wicked. He sets them up in slippery places by all those gifts and casts them down to destruction.

That's the Reformed teaching with regard to God's dealings in the world, that God is not favorable toward the reprobate ungodly but he curses them in all of his dealings with them in the world, and that he's always favorable to the righteous even in their calamities because he loves them, blesses them in his grace. The Reformed faith teaches that because the Bible teaches that. The Bible teaches that with regard to the plagued saint in Psalm 73, that God is good to Israel, he's always good to Israel even in the plaguing of Israel, he's never evil toward Israel and likewise that when the believer goes to the house of God and views God's dealings with the wicked in which they prosper, they grow fat in the world, he views that from the viewpoint of God in eternity, he sees that God isn't favorable toward them, he sets them up in order to cast them down to destruction.

The wise man likewise of Proverbs taught his own son, Proverbs 3:33 that, "The curse of the LORD is in the house of the wicked: but he blesseth the habitation of the just." That is, that God in the house whether it be a grand mansion or a little box, curses the ungodly, and that God in the habitation of the just always blesses the just, and that fact, then, demands that God's providence may never be general. God in his providence is always particular. He governs all. He upholds all. He gives to all everything that they have, their life and breath and all things, but that must be viewed from the viewpoint of his counsel and his love of his elect and his hatred of the reprobate.

In those three things, then, those three parts of the providence of God, his upholding, his governing and his decree, may never be separated. We distinguish them but we never separate them. Here we see the riches of God's providence. He upholds governing and in his government he upholds purposefully. God in his governing of the world isn't static. He upholds the world so that there is all kinds of variation in his government in upholding of the world. In the same thunderstorm in which he is showering rain upon the fields of the ungodly and the field of the righteous, he is blessing one and cursing the other. In his government of the world, he's governing the world such that there is constant change in the creation. As he moves that creation toward its appointed goal, only God stays the same, the creature changes. The evolutionist presents change in the world as a problem for providence. The evolutionist doesn't understand God and his great variety through his government of the world. The believer who knows God doesn't see change as a problem for God's government of the world. He knows God can change the world very rapidly because in a year and 10 days he destroyed one, the world that was watery, he destroyed it by water and afterward brought out a brand-new world that we see and in which we live today. One year he did all that.

And God in that government of the world governs all the changes that happen even in the environment. There are developments at the microscopic level. There are cycles and rhythms in the creation that man calls laws. Some of these the Bible speaks about explicitly. There is the water cycle. There is the birthing cycle. There is the cycle of the seasons. There is the cycle of planting and harvest. Many many more. None of that's excluded from God's providence. Change is part of God's government of the world as he hurries the creation along to the goal that he appointed, the glory of all things in Jesus Christ. He upholds all things then, too, with a view to that end. His upholding is no aimless power but he directs every creature toward its appointed end and to all creation to its goal in Christ.

When we speak, then, of God's providence, we must not suppose that that providence is to be abstracted from God. Providence is God as God upholds and governs with his own hand the entire creation. God does that, of course, with his word, his voice. When we speak about the upholding power of God and we speak about the governing power of God, what is that specifically? It's his voice. The Reformed were fond in the old days to speak about continual creation. They spoke of God's government of the world as a continual creation. The term isn't a good one and we shouldn't use it. It's not a good one because it doesn't distinguish properly between the work of creation in providence. God's work of providence is not a continual work of creation, and for another that calling God's

work in the world that he created a continual creation doesn't do justice to the truth that God finished his work of creation and moved to the work of providence. And yet again, that term isn't good because that term has been abused in the past to teach that God at every moment, and we can speak of moments of God's dealings with the world, at every moment in God's dealings of the world God was creating out of nothing the entire world again, and then if you have that at every precise moment God creating the world out of nothing, God brings nothing to a goal. Continual creation is not a good term. It must be rejected. But we ought to do justice as to why the Reformed spoke of God's providence as a continual creation. They used that term because the power of God in creation is the very same power of providence and they used that term to emphasize that fact. In creation, God spoke and that word was the essence of every creature. That creature didn't have its existence apart from the word of God, as God spoke light into existence and so forth.

Now what is providence? Providence is the continual utterance of the voice of God holding that creation and everything in it in its existence and directing it all toward the goal. That's the teaching of the Bible of all providence. In Hebrews 1:2 and 3 with regard to Jesus Christ, he says, "upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high." The word "word" there is "utterance." By continually speaking, he upholds all things and that's the teaching too of Psalm 29. The voice of the Lord does all those wonderful things in creation.

That view honors Jesus Christ as the one by whom God made the world and to whom for whom God made the world, and the one now by whom God governs the world holding a book in his hand and opening up successively the seven seals that bring the goal of all things. A man now exalted to the height, the most powerful position that a man will ever hold, controls the reins of the entire world. And that, too, teaches us that providence is not an impersonal power, it is the personal government of God. Like a rich man has a huge estate and on that estate he has all kinds of servants and hired hands and he personally directs and governs that entire estate and he does that for his family, so God has his estate in the world and he personally governs everything in it.

About that personal government, the Bible speaks vividly. He gathers the clouds and he rides on them like his chariot. He sends out the lightning. He brings night and day. He covers the ground with snow. He sends the rain and the hoarfrost. He gives the peacock its beauty, the ostrich its speed and its folly, the horse its strength. He commands the eagle to mount up on its wings and to fly and gives to her a nest in the crags of the rock. He hunts prey for the lions, provides food for the beasts, feeds ravens, clothes the lilies so that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of them. He gives the hinds to calve and helps them in their birth pains. He gives a habitation to the wild ass in the wilderness. He controls the unattainable unicorn, behemoth and leviathan. He delights in the great whales of the ocean. He numbers the hairs of every man's head and not one of them falls to the ground without his will. He sends rain and sunshine on the just and the unjust. He assents to the devil's propositions. He sends the devil against Ahab and Job. He gives him precise instructions to carry out. He raises kings and hews with them for a while and then removes them, chops them down. He stops the mouths of lions. He

overthrows plots against his people and has the heathen in derision. In all of that, God personally works and in all that, he does that with a paternal care toward his people.

When we speak, then, of God's providence, we must speak especially of God's sovereignty over evil. God in his providence is sovereign over evil. We are not interested tonight in our examination of the chief points of providence with the determination not to be robbed of God's providence, we are not interested in a theodicy. A theodicy is a justification of God. God will justify himself. That's what the final judgment is for God will justify all his dealings before men and be glorified.

Neither are we interested in explaining all evil in the world. Evil from one point of view is very simple to explain. The popular presentation of the so-called problem of evil which says this, "If God is good, why is there evil in the world?" it thwarts by and large the origin of evil. God didn't make evil. God made Adam in the beginning perfect and he gave to him a perfect world. Adam turned against God and rebelled and plunged the whole world and the entire human race into the curse and into untold misery and woe. Evil is man's fault because man sinned against God.

The believer, too in his sufferings, in his greatest sufferings, must confess his part in the existence of evil and untold woe in the world. He must confess his part because he's a child of Adam and responsible for Adam's sin in the garden. And on the other hand, there are certain evils in the world that are not perplexing at all. The suffering of the ungodly in the world who hate God, oppose Jesus Christ and are wicked, is not perplexing at all. The believer who knows the fearsome wrath of God against sin and who knows that in that fearsome wrath of God, God will punish the ungodly not only temporarily but eternally in hell, and the believer who knows the horribleness of the reality of hell and its eternity, for that believer the temporary suffering of the ungodly in this world is nothing. Sometimes, of course, God gives to the wicked a very easy life so that in his punishment of the ungodly he gives them all kinds of success in their sin in order to cast them down into hell. At other times, God plagues them with all sorts of miseries and woes, but in the end the viewpoint of that suffering of the reprobate ungodly is not perplexing to the believer. The just God is terribly displeased with his original as well as actual sins, and he punishes those sins temporarily and eternally with great evil. But that doesn't answer the question: why the fall? The believer is convicted and convinced that that fall, though man's fault, was wholly governed by God, and further, in this world now fallen in sin and under the curse, what do we say with regard to the suffering of God's dear children whose sins have been forgiven so that there is no punishment yet for their sins because satisfaction has been made, so that God blesses them and his favor rests upon them all their days, what do we say of their suffering?

So the Reformed faith in its explanation of the chief points of providence must explain God's sovereignty over evil. When we speak of God's sovereignty over evil, we refer to the truth that God sovereignly decreed the evil in his eternal counsel, that he controls and carries out the execution of that evil with his own hand, so that that evil is that over which God is wholly sovereign and yet in that sovereignty both in the decree and the

carrying out of that decree, he is not the author of sin and he may not be charged with evil.

That in a nutshell is the Reformed statement of God's sovereignty over evil. With regard to wicked men and devils, God upholds them in their wicked nature, in their rebellious lives. He decreed all the evil that they commit and he upholds them in their committing of them. With regard to the sins of those wicked men and devils, God decreed them and he decreed them in such a way that he also carries out through those men his decree. With regard to that government, that decree in government, God over evil, he does that in such a way that he can't be charged with those sins nor the evil committed. Furthermore with regard to the evil that befalls men in this world, in regard to his people, God says that he controls that evil for a good purpose. When we say that, when we state the sovereignty of God over evil in that way, he decreed the evil, that he himself governs its outcome, then the objector immediately says, "But you make God the author of sin." And to that objector we must reply, our reply first of all is this, "Prove it, that because he decrees it and carries it out that God is the author of sin. You make a very serious charge, O objector." And quoting the apostle in his reply against another pertinacious question of an unbelieving man, "Who art thou, O man, that repliest against God?" God's relationship to things is not like a man's, it's like God's. It's *suigeneris*; it is utterly unique. Simply because he decrees it and carries it out does not make him necessarily the author of evil because his relationship to things is not like man's.

Secondly, we reply if God is not sovereign over evil so that he decreed it and carried it out, then who is? Is man? Are devils? Is the devil sovereign over evil so that he may do whatever he wants, whenever he wants, to whomever he wants, and God can only react or wring his hands or weep in the face of the devil's great evil? The alternative to God's sovereignty over evil, all the difficulties with that position notwithstanding, is horrible, too horrible almost to mention. If God isn't sovereign over evil, then you have two dualing Gods, one a good God and one an evil God and the outcome of their battle is in doubt and the believer has no hope.

Third, the reply of the Reformed faith to the charge of the objector that that statement that God is sovereign over evil makes God the author of sin, is this: no Reformed person may deny it, no Reformed person may deny it because the creeds clearly teach it. The Heidelberg Catechism in its grand treatment accompanying the doctrine of providence in Lord's Day 10 teaches not only that God sends the herbs, the grass, the meat and the drink, the health and the fruitful years, which are certainly good, but that God also by his very same providence controlling that by his very same hand sends also evil, drought, barren years, sickness and poverty. In the Belgic Confession in its monumental statement of the Reformed doctrine of providence teaches in Article 13 nothing happens in the world by chance, and then it goes on to state that all of the evils, the greatest evils, the persecution of the devil on unrighteous men against the church, are controlled by God.

No Reformed person who wants to remain Reformed may question God's sovereignty, his absolute control and decree over all evil. The creeds teach it and the creeds teach it because the Bible teaches it. The reason that the Reformed faith teaches God's

sovereignty over evil is because the Bible is clear and the reason that many deny God's sovereignty over evil is not because the Bible is unclear. Moses says that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh in order to destroy Pharaoh and deliver Israel. Amos teaches in Amos 3:6, "shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it?" In this teaching, the Bible makes it abundantly clear in the book of Job where God is sovereign over all the activity of the Bible, and the devil in his persecution of Job, Job didn't have a problem if the devil did it, his problem came and he gave the most point expression to his problem when he said, "The Lord gave and the Lord took away, blessed be the name of the Lord." And the book for 42 chapters explores that awesome theme, God giving, God taking away one of his dear and beloved children, his sovereignty over evil.

The Bible teaches with regard to the greatest evil that was perpetrated in the entire Old Testament, the cursing of God's anointed, David by the wicked Shimei. 2 Samuel 16:10. Shimei comes out against David, cursing as he comes. Great evil. David explains that, "let him curse, because the LORD said unto him, Curse David." And at the heart and unlocking the mystery of God's sovereignty over evil is the cross of Jesus Christ, the most perplexing and, indeed, the greatest evil. The most strange suffering in the whole world isn't the suffering of some human, not even your or my suffering but it's the suffering of the Son of God. How do we explain his suffering? And we must. Preaching the cross, the Apostle Peter explained that cross in Acts 2:23, "Him, being delivered," that is Jesus Christ, "by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." Their wicked hands did nothing but what God's counsel determined and the church explaining its own suffering at the hand of the wicked world, confessed about the cross of Jesus Christ in Acts 4:27-28, "For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy counsel and thy hand determined before to be done."

The cross unlocks the mystery of God's sovereignty over evil. First of all, it's only by faith in the cross of Jesus Christ at which God bruised Christ for our sins that you will also confess that God is sovereign over evil in the world also in your own life. In confessing that cross and seeing that that cross was God's, not man's, and that at that cross God took the greatest evil, the suffering of the Son of God, and he worked in that the greatest good in the salvation of the elect and of all creation as their hope, we see that God is sovereign over all evil and turns it to the good of his church. Then that cross standing on the ground of that cross that I can also seek God's particularity in his government in the world. That cross wasn't for everybody. That cross was for the sheep. That cross was for those who are in Christ by election, by redemption, and by faith, and in that cross, then, I believe that I am righteous by faith and therefore that I stand in the favor of God, not because of what I did but because of what Christ did, and therefore that I stand absolutely assuredly in the favor of God so that whatsoever he sends me in this world whether sickness or health, fruitful or barren years, he sends it in his favor and for my eternal salvation. You can only see that in the cross and the cross has the power to sanctify me in the midst of evil so that I actually confess that God is sovereign over that evil. He works to my good through that evil so that I'm thankful in prosperity and patient in adversity. And in that cross we see the grand scope of God's providence over evil.

Why evil in the world? Because it was his will to reveal the glory of his grace and the marvel of his power and his saving goodness through the dark way of the fall of sin, of misery, of death, and of redemption, of grace, of salvation, and of eternal life. That's why evil, because that was his will.

We see in the cross that God's purpose in the world never was Adam but Christ and that he will bring that world in Christ when Christ comes again, disinheriting the ungodly who have no right to it, and causing us to enter into an eternal inheritance in a new heaven and new earth, and that means providence comforts me. It comforts me with God. It comforts me with his greatness against my puniness. It comforts me with his power against my powerlessness. It comforts me with his eternity against my time-bound limitedness. It comforts me with his power in the face of my frailty. It comforts me with God, a God who is gracious in all his dealings with his people in Jesus Christ. It comforts me with this as I stand on this side the grave, with a God who is God and outside of which nothing happens, with a God who has become my Father in Jesus Christ, so that for my good and the good of the whole church, he governs all things.

The doctrine of providence comforts me in this sin-cursed and miserable world with the promise of a new day and a new creation and faith in providence sanctifies. If you believe God's providence and you confess it, you will be thankful in prosperity and you will be patient in adversity. The faith in providence and by prosperity turns me away from those earthly things to God so I don't worship them, worship him. The faith in providence in my adversity silences my rebellious lips, quiets my disturbed heart so that I will his will and endure whatsoever he sends me in this life. Faith in providence even makes you sing in adversity. You're like a farmer or maybe his wife saying long ago with regard to her faith in providence, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, the labor of the olive shall fail and the field shall yield no meat, the flock shall be cut off from the fold and there shall be no herd in the stalls, yet will I rejoice in the Lord. I will joy in the God of my salvation." There you see faith in providence. Not a stoic resignation to evil in this life but a rejoicing by faith in the God of providence, in the fact that the Lord gives and takes away and blessed be his name. To sing about a hope that's reserved in heaven. To sing because all this was the work of a heavenly Father who is gracious to me in Christ. To sing because we will not be robbed of God's providence, the source of unspeakable consolation.

I thank you.

All right, I think the questions are collected. Before I turn the microphone over to Reverend Langerak, I would like to thank him for the speech tonight. It's always appropriate for God's people to be reminded of God's providence but in our churches in the past couple of weeks some events have taken place that have made tonight's message very meaningful. I thank you for that and I'm turning it over, you'll answer the questions and close.

Okay, thank you. The one question: can you articulate Calvin's conception of natural grace (God's bridling of the wicked to preserve the world from destruction etc.) in light of

God's providence, what did Calvin mean by this term? I don't know if the questioner raises the question as a way to contradict the contention of the speech that God is not at all gracious to the reprobate ungodly in the world, I don't think so, but the questioner too tries to give a definition of what they understand God's bridling of the wicked to preserve the world from destruction. I debate that that is what Calvin meant by Calvin's use of the term natural grace. First of all, Reformed theologians for many years have been rooting around in the dung of Calvin to find all the times that Calvin used the term grace over against the reprobate and that they can try to prove the rather recent development in Reformed churches that God is gracious toward the reprobate ungodly. God is not gracious toward the reprobate ungodly on God's providence and on God's reprobation and election.

When Calvin used the term natural grace or grace with regard to the reprobate ungodly, first of all we have to say Calvin spoke indistinctly. Calvin never had to battle common grace and so Calvin was careless with his terms and used the word grace rather freely. Calvin never meant by that that God in the heart of the reprobate ungodly restrained sin, Calvin meant by his understanding of God's restraint upon the reprobate ungodly what the Reformed creeds and Belgic Confession Article 36 teach about God's restraint upon the reprobate ungodly, that he does so by a sword, that is, by the physical sword of the magistrate to restrain the outbreak of man's wicked sin so that the world can have some decency and order in it, and that God does that with a regard for his people, not with any grace toward the reprobate but so that the reprobate may serve God's people and so that we can live a quiet and peaceable life in the world, so that Calvin never or at least never taught clearly that God was gracious in the sense that the term is used today. He used the term very indistinctly and he meant when he did that an outward restraint upon the reprobate ungodly.

With that, let's close.

Our Father in heaven, we thank thee for thy providence and the faith to believe it, and we pray that the truth of thy providence as it is confessed particularly by the Reformed faith may be trumpeted in this age of unbelief and doubt, and that by means of that clear message, that thine own might be gathered into the comforting sphere of thy gracious fatherly government over all things, also our evil. Lord, increase our faith in thee and in thy Son that we might be thankful in our prosperity, so that we might be patient in our adversity expecting from thy hand every good and perfect gift until Christ appear and dry all our tears and make all things perfect. Pardon our sins for Jesus' sake. Amen.