

Safe in the Hands of our Father

Ps. 48: 1, 3, 4

Ps. 33: 5

Ps. 116: 5, 7

Table: Doxology Hymn 27: 1

Ps. 104: 7, 8

Ps. 115: 2, 5

Ps. 33: 2, 3

Scripture reading: Mt. 10: 16 – 31

Reading from Confessions: BC Art. 13

Text: LD 10

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Together we confess: “I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth”. This almighty Creator did not abandon His creation. He upholds and governs His creation with infinite wisdom and knowledge and power. We confess a Creator who governs His creation in such a way that there is no room for chance. He governs all things even in the smallest detail; in such a way that **all** things happen as He has determined it from all eternity. He governs all things, even the smallest thing, according to His eternal counsel, fulfilling His purpose, executing His will.

In the Belgic Confession, art. 13, we confess (amongst other things) that we “reject the damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God does not concern Himself with anything but leaves all things to chance”.

Our confession is the opposite of that error: God the Father, who has become our Father through Christ, created all things out of nothing, and He still “upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that...all things come to us not by chance, but by His fatherly hand”.

The power of God did not cease when creation was completed. Neither did God pull Himself back from His creation, after creating it. No, the **same** power by which He called the world into being is still actively present to uphold and to govern **all** things according to His purpose.

Such is the almighty God whom we confess to be our God and Father!

I proclaim God’s word to you with the theme:

We are safe in the hands of our Father, the almighty Creator

We will note:

1. That nothing happens by chance, but only according to God’s purpose
2. The depth of God’s unsearchable wisdom
3. The fruit of trusting God’s providence

In the first place we note that...

Nothing happens by chance, but that all things happen according to God’s purpose

There are not many who will dispute the fact that this world is upheld by a secret power of God. There is such an abundance of reference to this in Scripture that it is immediately clear that God upholds and cares for all His creatures. David says:

“O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom You have made them all. The earth is full of your possessions – this great and wide sea in which are innumerable teeming things, living things both small and great...These all wait for You, that you may give them their food in due season. What you give them they gather in; You open Your hand, they are filled with good. You hide Your face, they are troubled;

You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the earth” – Ps. 104: 24 – 30.

But when Scripture speaks of God’s providence it does not stop at this that God’s Spirit upholds and sustains all things; it also speaks of God’s will and God’s purpose, that He **governs** all things according to His **eternal counsel**. And His government is not only seen in this event or in that event, now and then, here or there, but indeed **all** things – that is: **everything!** – are purposefully governed by Him with absolute precision according to **His** will!

What a confession!

To us it may seem as if many things happen by chance. A builder builds a house and accidentally drops a brick; someone walks pass and the brick falls on his head. It was an accident. And because it was an accident, the builder will not be guilty of murder, but he may be charged with manslaughter if the man dies. The builder had no bad intention when the brick slipped from his hand, it was purely an accident. Yet, where such accidents are described in God’s law, we read:

“...God lets it happen...” – Ex. 21: 13 (NIV)

Or as we may translate the Hebrew text:

“...God lets it meet his hand...”

Even accidents do not happen by chance. God was actively in control when that brick slipped from the builder’s hand. And all the consequences that follow such an accident were calculated by God from all eternity.

Nothing happens by chance.

When the wind blows, it blows on God’s command; when it rains, it rains on God’s command. But there is more to it. The wind will blow only as much as God commands it to blow, and it will blow only for as long as it should blow and where it should blow. It will rain only where God has commanded the rain to fall, and only as much as He commanded.

And while God governs all things in nature, His care is especially for His church.

We read this afternoon from Matthew chapter 10 where the Lord says:

“Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. The very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows”

If we look at the context of that passage, we see that Christ is speaking to His disciples about their task to proclaim His word in the midst of much persecution.

“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves...they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues” (10: 16, 17).

And then He exhorts them that, in the midst of all the persecution which they will suffer, they have to remember that not one sparrow falls on the ground apart from our Father’s will. And since God’s children are of more value than many sparrows, they do not have to fear anything that will happen to them. Even the hair of their head is numbered.

What is Christ saying to them? He is not telling them that no harm will come their way. Instead, He makes clear to them that the persecution will be unto death.

“Do not fear those who kill the body...” – verse 28.

They will even kill you, but not one hair will fall from your head apart from your Father’s will! Even in the smallest detail, your Father will still be in control, so that you – in the midst of sorrow and persecution – may receive all things from your Father’s hand. You will never be the toy of blind fate. Nothing will happen to you by chance. Even your hair are all numbered!

That is the extent of God’s providence: it includes everything without exception. It includes every tear, it includes every word and deed; and as we will shortly see, God’s providence includes even every thought of man’s heart.

Not even nature is natural. Nature does indeed function according to the laws which God has given it at creation, but not in such a way that it is now governed by its own law. No, nature is every moment not only **upheld** by God, but also **purposefully governed** by God. Not one drop of rain falls without His command. No tree grows and no fruit ripen apart from His will and council.

We have many examples in Scripture to illustrate this. When God pronounces His blessings on those who obey, and His curse on those who disobey, He employs nature to execute His judgement. Fruitful years come on His command; drought appears only on His instruction.

“...rain and drought, fruitful and barren years...health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed all things, come to us not by chance, but by His fatherly hand”

Nature awaits God’s instructions.

In the time of Joshua the LORD commanded the sun to stand still, and He made that day twice as long as any other day. We know what that means: the whole solar system came to an immediate standstill. The whole clockwork of sun, moon and stars stopped, and only continued their routine on God’s command.

That same day the Lord cast down large hailstones from heaven on the enemies of Israel. On other occasions He used thunder and fire, or a strong wind. Yes, all of creation acts on His command. Nature has only one rule: to obey God’s voice.

Thus we also read in the Psalms:

“Praise Him, sun and moon; praise Him, all you stars of light! Praise Him, you heavens of heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the LORD, for He commanded and they were created. He also established them forever and ever; He made a decree which shall not pass away” – Psalm. 148: 3 – 6.

Not only did the Lord call them into being; He also governs them by His decree.

Now, when we speak of God’s providence and His eternal counsel whereby He governs all things, we have to admit that much of His counsel is hidden from us. We do not always understand why God acts in a certain way, and we do not understand everything that happens to us in this life. God’s providence is for the greater part beyond our comprehension.

We note that in the second place...

The depth of God's unsearchable wisdom

The prophet Jeremiah says:

“O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” – Jer. 10: 23.

And we read:

“A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps” – Prov. 16: 9.

And again we read:

“A man's steps are of the LORD; how then can a man understand his own way?” – Prov. 20: 24.

“The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes” – Prov. 21: 1

If the Lord directs a king's mind and thoughts as He pleases, then He also directs the mind and the thoughts of the judge, and the doctor, and the teacher.

God is even in control of wicked people. God even employs wicked men with their wicked deeds to do His holy will. Yet, man remains responsible for his own deeds.

The Lord says in Isaiah 10 that He uses Assyria as a stick to beat Israel. It is the LORD who sends Assyria against Israel to trample Israel under foot. The Lord uses that ungodly people with their cruelty to punish Israel for her sins. He uses the king of Assyria to chastise and to purify his chosen people and to punish the covenant breakers. But when He has beaten Israel, and has poured out His wrath on the ungodly amongst them, then He will break the stick. He will punish the king of Assyria for what he has done.

Yes, Assyria is a stick in the Lord's hand. The Lord is sending Assyria against Israel. And it is the Lord who beats Israel with this cruel stick; but the stick is responsible, and the stick will be punished. Why? Because: Assyria, and the king of Assyria, had different motives than the LORD. The king of Assyria did not beat Israel with the intention to execute God's wrath on Israel, or to chasten and to sanctify the Lord's people. No, Assyria's intention was only bad. In his pride he destroyed nations, in his cruelty he acted wickedly. And there was no thought in his mind of obeying God. He did not realise that he was only a stick in the hand of the Lord. He thought that he was acting with his own power. And even for that the Lord will punish him – Isaiah chapter 10.

An evil king and an evil nation acting wickedly, but God uses them as an instrument in His hand to execute His holy will, even to purify His people. And He does so without polluting Himself with their deeds – they remain fully responsible for their own deeds! God is not the author of evil when He employs evil men with their evil deeds to execute His holy will. The Lord used Assyria to beat Israel, but He also punished Assyria for beating Israel. Assyria was responsible for its own deeds, and the LORD was pure and justified in what He did.

Or think of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph tells them:

“...as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good...” – Gen. 50: 20

Joseph's brothers did evil when they sold their brother as slave to Egypt. Their act, as well as their intention, was nothing but cruel and wicked. And **they** are responsible for what they have done. The guild of sin lies fully with them. Yet, Joseph does not hesitate to ascribe the same happening to God's providence – God meant it for good. The Lord has directed it all to fulfil His good purpose. That does not take away their sins and it does not make their guilt any less. They are guilty, but God was in control directing everything according to His counsel and according to His purpose.

This does not make God the author of evil; man is fully responsible for his own deeds. We may not accuse God for our own corruption and foolishness. Solomon speaks of this and says:

“When a man’s folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the LORD” – Prov. 19: 3 (ESV)

A foolish man destroys his own life, and then he blames God for it. It is characteristic of the fool to blame God, when he has no one to blame but himself.

Yes, God directs a man’s very steps, and yet man remains responsible for every step he makes.

There is a mystery in this – God’s absolute control of all things, while man remains responsible for his own deeds. Our minds are too small to put the two together.

We find the ultimate example of this in Christ’s suffering and death. Judas Iscariot is guilty. It would have been better for him if he was never born. And Pontius Pilot is guilty. And all who shouted “Crucify Him!” is guilty and responsible for that sin. Yet, Christ’s disciples pray to the Lord and they say:

“...against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilot, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together **to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done**” – Acts 4: 27, 28.

Pontius Pilot and Herod and the Gentiles and the people of Israel did everything which **God** has determined beforehand to be done. And they did it **exactly** as it was determined by God. Throughout we read that this happened and that happened in order that the Scriptures may be fulfilled.

What Judas Iscariot has done was laid down in the prophecies. It was impossible that Judas would not commit his evil work, for it was proclaimed beforehand in Scripture. Yet, Judas is responsible and guilty for what he has done.

Those who mocked Christ, saying: “He saves others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God”(Luke 23: 35), they are guilty for mocking the Son of God. Yet, it was impossible that they would **not** mock Him in this way, for it has been proclaimed by the prophets:

“All those who see Me ridicule Me; they shoot out the lip, they shake their head saying, ‘He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!’ – Ps. 22: 7.

The soldiers **had** to cast the lot for His tunic in order that the Scriptures may be fulfilled. And therefore they did it – John 19: 24. One of the soldiers **had** to pierce Him with his spear in order that the Scriptures could be fulfilled – John 19: 37.

When the soldiers came to break Jesus’ bones, they could not do it, not because His bones were unbreakable, but because the Scriptures cannot be broken, and the counsel of God cannot be broken, therefore not one of His bones were broken. They did, and they could only do, what was determined beforehand. And everything happened exactly as it was prophesied. Yet, each one remained responsible for his own deeds!

On the one hand it was impossible that they would not do as was determined beforehand, on the other hand they alone are responsible for their sin against the Son of God.

God even employed their most wicked deeds for our salvation. For when they crucified Christ in their hatred, the same event was determined by God for our deliverance.

While man is responsible for his own deeds, God is fully in control, even in the smallest detail of man’s actions.

Because our mind is too small to match God’s sovereign and absolute control with human responsibility, therefore we also confess in the Belgic Confession:

“...God is not the author of the sins which are committed, nor can He be charged with them. For His power and goodness are so great and beyond understanding that He ordains and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner even when devils and evil men act unjustly. And as to His actions surpassing human

understanding, we will not curiously inquire further than our capacity allows us. But with the greatest humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, and we content ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, who have only to learn those things which He teaches us in His Word, without transcending these limits” – art. 13.

Dear congregation, God’s absolute control over all things – to such an extent that He even directs a man’s every step – that absolute control also applies to our eternal salvation. If He governs even the small things which seem to us less important, then surely He governs also the big things. And thus we read in Scripture that He has predestined us according to His purpose, and that He works all things according to the counsel of His will – Eph. 1: 11.

It transcends our minds. And therefore, after an exposition of God’s eternal election, the apostle Paul cries out with wonder and awe, saying:

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” – Rom. 11: 33

But there is still another reason why God’s providence is beyond our comprehension. There are many things that happen to us in this life for which we do not know the cause, nor the purpose.

Job’s friends thought they know the reason for Job’s suffering: God is punishing you for your sins, Job! And would we not agree with them? When one disaster after the other befell Job, and one blow after the other came down on his head until he is crushed, would we not conclude that God has turned against him? And would a man suffer so severely if he had not done something wrong? But we know from Scripture that this was not the case. Job was blameless and upright, one who feared God and shunned evil. His suffering was **not** the result of any special sin that he committed.

Job had no idea why that terrible suffering came over him. Yes, we all deserve nothing but death, and thus: whatever suffering we receive is just. But the fact is: Job did not commit

any specific sin which caused his suffering. He was more just than any other man on earth. Yet, look at his suffering! And the cause remained hidden from him. He did not hear the conversation between God and Satan which is recorded for us in Scripture. There was no way in which he could know why. Even at the end of all his sufferings he received no clear answer as to the reason for his suffering. The only answer he received was this: do not dare to argue with the almighty Creator of heaven and earth! God is God, and we are only dust. Full stop! And Job bowed down and worshipped.

Submitting himself to God Job did not become angry, but confessed:

“...The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD”
(Job 1: 21)

Initially, before he was prompted by his friends, he was content not to ask any questions. And after he was tempted to say many things and to ask many question, he finally came back to his first response: he put his hand on his mouth, and without knowing the reason for His suffering, he again submitted himself to God and worshipped the almighty Creator who executes all His pleasure. The point is: Job submitted Himself to God even though he could not understand God’s dealings with him.

Brothers and sisters, Scripture provides us with many examples in this regard. Once, when Jesus’ disciples saw a blind man, they asked Jesus:

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Jesus answered:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned...” – John 9: 3.

That is: his blindness was not God’s punishment on any specific sin that he or his parents committed. Instead, he was born blind for no other reason known to us, than that God would use this man’s blindness to display His work of grace – John 9: 3.

The blind man could not have known beforehand that he would become an example of Christ's power and saving grace in the way it happened. He simply had to submit himself to God's dealings with him. He simply had to trust the Lord, without knowing why he was born blind.

Dear congregation, these examples also serve to instruct us. Many times we do not know why a certain accident happened, or why we suffer a certain illness, or why this or that happens to us. And we simply have to submit ourselves to God in faith, trusting Him that **He** knows what He is doing, and that His will is best for us, even when we do not understand why or how.

All suffering is the result of sin, yet we have to discern. Every believer may expect to suffer persecution in this world. Such suffering is for the sake of Christ; not for the sake of your own sins. Or, as in the case of Job, you may suffer very severe trials without knowing why, and you simply have to submit yourself to God in faith.

The curse of God rests on this whole earth, and we all suffer daily the general curse that rests on this earth: thorns and thistles, sorrows and pain, illness and poverty. But there are also instances in which we have to say: this or that specific suffering is the result of this or that specific sin. When an adulterer gets aids, then it is not hard to connect his suffering to sin. And we must always be prepared to do self examination when we suffer, to make sure whether we have to repent of a specific sin.

And yet it often happens that we simply don't know and cannot know the exact reason for our suffering. But in all situations we do know the gospel, and in all situations we are assured of God's love for us in Christ, knowing also that He, the Creator of heaven and earth, is in complete control and **He** knows what He is doing.

The doctrine of God's providence would have been a hard and a cold doctrine, if we did not know this almighty God to be our Father through Christ. It is through Christ that this almighty and awesome God becomes our trust and our comfort. Through Christ we may look at God's absolute control with hearts full of awe, and worship, and thanksgiving. For this Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, has become our shield and our trust.

It is through our Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, that this doctrine becomes to us an infinite source of comfort. Through faith in Christ, this doctrine also bears fruit in our life. We note that in the third place...

The fruit of trusting God's providence

Of one thing we are assured: God's love for us in Christ. We have full assurance of His love for us because we rely on God's sure promises. He made a covenant with us, and in Christ we see His love and faithfulness towards us. **Here** is the evidence of God's love towards me: He gave His own Son to die for my sins and to make me His own; He called me with this gospel, and He commands me to believe this gospel. Whatever may happen to me in this life, one thing I will know: through Jesus Christ God has become my God. Yes, the Creator of heaven and earth has become my Father and has promised to work all things for my good.

With this in mind the doctrine of God's providence will now bear fruit in my life. When I know for sure that nothing in this life happens by chance but only by the will and purpose of God, then I am also able to **receive** all things from His hand.

Let us once more take Job as an example. When the Chaldeans came and slaughtered Job's men and stole his cattle, Job did not become angry. Job did not start to think of ways in which he can take vengeance on them to pay them back. Neither did he become bitter. Why not? How could he in such a circumstance bow down and worship?! Two things: first of all he trusted that God was fully in control, and in the second place He trusted God that He is good and just in all His doing.

“The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD”

We see the same with Joseph. He did not bear any grudge against his brothers, neither did all the suffering that befell him make him bitter. Why not? Did he not know that his brothers sinned against him? Did he not know that his imprisonment was unfair? Yes, but he knew more than that. He knew also that God has ordained it to happen and that God uses it all for His good purpose. He could receive it all with patience and longsuffering, **because:** he received it from the hand of his heavenly Father.

Through all ages the doctrine of God's providence comforted his church in times of persecution and affliction. In the midst of the burning furnace, or in the lion's den, on the stake, or in prison, God's children knew that the very hair on their head is all numbered.

No man and no creature – not even the devil – can do us any harm without the will of our Father. And when it does please our Father to send us adversity in this life of sorrow – to test our faith, or to chastise us for the sake of our sanctification, to teach us obedience, or to cleanse us, or when it pleases Him that we may suffer for Christ's sake – then we know for sure that nothing happens to us except that which He has determined for our good.

What a comfort! What a peace to rely on such a God and Father!

Dear congregation, the knowledge that God is governing all things does not only make us patient and strong in the midst of adversity, it also makes us thankful in prosperity. If we know that God is the only source of all good, and that no good can come to us except from His hand, then we will also thank and honour Him for it.

When we know that the rain falls only on His command, then we thank Him for it. Only if you know for sure that the bread on your table has come from His hand, are you able to thank Him from the heart. If you truly know that the money in your bank account is only from His hand, then you are also able to thank Him truly. If you know that your health is not a matter of blind fate or of chance, then you know how to thank Him when you wake up with a feeling of freshness. If your family live together in one house in peace and harmony, then the knowledge that this gift is from God alone, makes you to thank Him for it.

The doctrine of God's providence, when rightly understood, opens our mouth to praise and to thank God for all good as we receive it through faith in Christ as gifts from His Fatherly hand.

When we know that our Father, the almighty Creator of heaven and earth, governs all things in such a way that nothing is left to chance or to blind fate, but that **all** things are purposefully determined by His eternal counsel and His divine will, then we also have a sure hope for the future. With Him who holds heaven and earth in His hand, with Him who directs the heart of man in any direction as He pleases, with Him, the Almighty, I am safe – now and for all eternity. In Him I find peace even when I walk through the valley of the

shadow of death. And in Him, the fountain of all good, I will delight myself with thanksgiving.

Such is the fruit of this doctrine when we know God as the almighty Creator who still upholds and governs all things. Let us bow down before Him, and thank Him, for this almighty God has become our Father.

Amen.