

AMAZING GRACE:

Session 1: Divine Sovereignty & Human Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

- “My concern is that, in the last forty years or so, the evangelical church has put so much emphasis on the casual, the intimate, the “come as you are,” the accessibility of the gentle Christ, that two unfortunate things have happened. One is that this emphasis has morphed into a pervasive form of entertainment-like worship, with an atmosphere of chipper, funny, lighthearted cheerleading, so that nothing would feel more natural than to grab your drink and join the party as we go into the worship space. And the other effect of this lopsided emphasis on the casual approachability of God is that the kind of existential encounter with the majesty of God that I’m talking about has become, for many people, inconceivable and, therefore, undesirable.” **John Piper**
- “In a psychological world, we want therapy; in a moral world, a world of right and wrong and good and evil, we want redemption. In a psychological world, we want to be happy. In a moral world, we want to be holy. In the one, we want to feel good but in the other we want to be good.”¹ **David Wells**
- “The gospel is not really the gospel unless it is a gospel of grace; in other words, the gospel is only good news if it announces what God has done to save sinners.”² **James Montgomery Boice**
- “Calvinism is something much broader than the ‘five points’ indicate. Calvinism is a whole world-view, stemming from a clear vision of God as the whole world’s Maker and King. Calvinism is the consistent endeavor to acknowledge the Creator as the Lord, working all things after the counsel of His will. Calvinism is a theocentric way of thinking about all life under the direction and control of God’s own Word. Calvinism, in other words, is the theology of the Bible viewed from the perspective of the Bible —the God-centered outlook which sees the Creator as the source, and means, and end, of everything that is, both in nature and in grace. . . . The five points assert no more than that God is sovereign in saving the individual, but Calvinism, as such, is concerned with the much broader assertion that He is sovereign everywhere.”³ **J.I. Packer**

I. THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE

A. Definitions of providence:

- **Heidelberg Catechism Q27 (1563):** The almighty and everywhere-present power of God, whereby, as it were by his hand, he upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come, not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.
- **Westminster Catechism (1648):** God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them and all their actions, to his own glory.

¹ David Wells, *God in the Whirlwind*.

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 18.

³ “Introductory Essay,” J.I. Packer, in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, 5.

B. God ordains all that occurs in creation.

- **Statement of Faith:** From all eternity, God sovereignly ordained all that exists and all that occurs in his creation, in order to display the fullness of his glory. God's plans are efficacious, always coming to pass, and they are universal, encompassing all the affairs of nature, history, and individual lives.
- All that occurs in nature:
 - Weather (Lev. 26:4-5; 19-20; Job 37:6-13; Psa. 107:25, 29; 147:15-18)
 - Plants and animals (Gen. 41:25-32; Lev. 26:22; Jonah 1:17; 2:10; 4:6-7)
 - Demons and Satan (Job 1:10, 12; 2:3-6; Luke 8:30-33)
- All that occurs in history:
 - Nations: The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth . . . made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place. Acts 17:24-26 (Dan 4:17; Psa 75:7; Rom 13:1)
- All that occurs in the lives of individual people:
 - Their birth: Psalm 139:13-15
 - Their circumstances: "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" Ex 4:11; 1 Sam 2:6-7
 - Their decisions: The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will. Prov. 21:1 (2 Sam 17:14; 1 Kings 12:15)
 - Their plans: The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. Prov. 16:9
 - Their words & actions: Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Psa. 139:4-5 (Gen 20:6; Acts 4:27-28; James 4:15)

C. All that occurs in creation is according to his will.

- **Statement of Faith:** These decrees are an exercise of his free, unchangeable, wise, and holy will.
- God is free:
 - *Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.* Psalm 115:3
 - *Moses said, "Please show me your glory." And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."* Exodus 33:18-20 (Rom 9:15)
- God is wise:
 - *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"* Romans 11:33-36
- All God does is according to his sovereign will:
 - Moral will: *Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* Matt 6:10
 - Sovereign will: *My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.* Matt 26:39

II. THE MYSTERY OF PROVIDENCE

A. How does this providence work out in real life?

- **Statement of Faith:** Yet God, in his foreordination, is not the author of sin, nor do his decrees negate the will of his creatures, who act with the power of willing choice in accord with their nature. His ordaining and governing all things is compatible with his creatures' moral accountability such that God never condemns a person unjustly. Therefore, all persons are responsible for their actions, which have real and eternal consequences.
- **Westminster Confession of Faith (1646):** God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.
- "The Bible as a whole, and sometimes in specific texts, presupposes or teaches that both of the following are true:
 - (1) God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in Scripture to reduce human responsibility.
 - (2) Human beings are responsible creatures—that is, they choose, they believe, they disobey, they respond, and there is moral significance in their choices; but human responsibility never functions in Scripture to diminish God's sovereignty or to make God absolutely contingent."⁴ **D.A. Carson**

B. Biblical examples:

- **Joseph:** *"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."* Gen. 50:20
- **Pharaoh:** *I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord."* And they did so. Exodus 14:4
- **The betrayal of Jesus:** *"For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."* Mark 14:21
- **The death of Jesus:** *"This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."* Acts 2:23
- **Salvation:** *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.* John 6:37-40

⁴ D.A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 179.

- **The offer of salvation:** *At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."* Matthew 11:25-30

"In efficacious grace we are not merely passive, nor yet does God do some, and we do the rest. But God does all and we do all. God produces all, and we act all. For that is what he produces, viz. our own acts. God is the only proper author and fountain; we only are the proper actors. We are, in this respect, wholly passive and wholly active." **Jonathan Edwards**

- **Sanctification:** *Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.* Phil. 2:12-13

III. THE CLARITY OF PROVIDENCE

- **Heidelberg Catechism Q28 (1563):** What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by his providence? We can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love; for all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot so much as move.
- "We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal." **John Calvin**