



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology

TRANSCRIPT

“Providence (God’s Hand Over Nature, Individuals and Nations of the World)”

Let’s begin with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father we thank Thee for the privilege for the study of the word of God again. We thank Thee for the way in which Thou hast set forth in the Scriptures the thoughts and the doctrines and the teachings which Thou hast desired that we study and learn.

And we pray O God that Thou wilt give us a deep desire to come to an understanding of divine faith. We thank Thee for the studies that we have had and we pray that in next month when we begin again Thy presence may be with us, that Thy providence may guide and direct us as we study the Scriptures. We commit each one to Thee and this class now especially.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] Now it seems as if it were a long time since we met, but I want to add a thought or two to our last lesson, but just briefly. And then we’re going on to our last subject which is, “Providence or God’s Hand Over Nature, Individuals and the Nations of the World.”

We were studying last time creation or the origin of the natural and spiritual world. And I had put on the board the outline: Roman I: The idea of creation, capital A: An act of the triune God, capital B: A free act of God, capital C: The central act of God, capital D: An act which brings forth something out of nothing. (By the way if there’s a slight change in your notes from what I’m saying -- because sometimes I change them as I put them on the board to shorten them.) Capital E: The distinct but dependent existence and capital F: The purpose the glory of God. And then Roman II: Divergent theories of the world’s origin and we referred greatly to the dualistic theory, capital A; The emanation theory, capital B; The evolution theory, capital C; and under that we referred to atheistic evolution and secondly to theistic evolution.

It is possible, of course, to believe in evolution and believe in God. Then I made some comments -- capital B, on evolutionary theory -- though not strictly speaking, all objections, but I did suggest to you that evolution is a by faith theory. That doesn’t necessarily mean it’s wrong, of course, our theory of creation is a by faith theory, but evolution is a bi-faith theory. It is not proven fact. Then secondly, the universe arose suddenly according to the latest scientific theories. Then capital B: The second law of thermodynamics appears to be in opposition to evolutionary theory. And finally, I suggested that the Genesis account, as it is given in the first chapter in the Book of Genesis, makes geological sense. That is, it is in accord with what we know from geology.

Now I want to add Roman III and just give you the outline, not say much about it, because I think the things that are included under this point we have discussed in one way or another. Roman III: The scriptural account of creation, Genesis 1:1 to Genesis 2:4 and capital A: The when of creation, Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” What I’d like to say here is we really cannot be with any sense of finality the time of creation according to the biblical account. We could, I think, say this; that man is relatively recent in time. And generally speaking, scientists agree with this.

But the date of the creation itself is updateable so far as I can tell. Although, I think to be honest the Bible does not give creation the age that modern scientific theory does.

Capital B: The how of creation, Genesis 1:1 again. And I’d like to just say again what I said about the word create when we first considered it. The word create in Genesis 1:1 is never used of a human production – *bara*, B-A-R-A -- that word is never used of a human creation or production and furthermore, it is never found with the accusative of matter. In other words, it is never stated, “God created such and such out of, and then some matter referred to.” So that this word is a word that is especially appropriate for a creation out of nothing.

And I think that as we read Genesis chapter 1, we would come to the conclusion that the creation that God describes in Genesis 1 is a creation out of nothing. *Bara* appears three times in Genesis 1. It occurs in verse 1 and there is no transition from the nothing to inordinate matter, “God created the heavens and the earth.” It occurs again in verse 21, and if my interpretation of this word is true then there is not transition from inorganic life to organic life. That text, you know, speaks about the creation of the great whales and so forth.

And then in verse 27 is the final occurrence of the word in the creation of man and if my interpretation of this word is correct, we can say that there is no transition from inordinate to human life or to man. Some time it will be good for us if we just took out a little time and just studied evolution as a whole, but we don’t have time in our quick study at all.

In capital C: The why of creation. Genesis 1, verses 26 and 27 in which it is stated that God created man in his image and his likeness and from which we may gather among many reasons for which man is created, that man is created for fellowship with God.

Let’s leave creation and let’s go on to providence now, for this is our last topic and we want to be sure and finish it tonight. The subject: “Providence, or God’s Hand Over

Nature, Individuals and the Nations of the World. And let’s read just two passages from the New Testament for Scripture reading before we study providence. The first in the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and the second is the first chapter of his letter to the Colossians. Ephesians chapter 1, verse 11. So will you take your New Testament and turn there. Paul writes, “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.”

Now will you notice especially the last part of that statement, “Him who works all things after the counsel of his will.” I think we could say from this, and we’ll say more about it as we go along, but we could say from this that there is nothing that is not in this sense brought out by God. He works all things according to the counsel of his own will. All of his activity with men, all of his activity with nations, all of his activities with things involve him.

Now the second passage is Colossians chapter 1, verse 17. Colossians 1, verse 17. That’s Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians chapter 1, verse 17. Seventeen -- that’s the number of Don Meredith. Now you can remember this text. Can you not? Just think of Don. Colossians 1, verse 17, “He is before all things, and in Him (that is by Jesus Christ) all things hold together.” Consist; he is the principle of coherence in the world. All things by him consist.

Now, a few words by way of introduction, I’ll give you the outline as we go, for those of you that are taking notes. I would like to see your notes some day. I want to look over your shoulder to see what you’ve written down. First of all, the term providence is not found in the Bible, however, the doctrine certainly is. Now we need not be disturbed. I hope by now in our studies in theology that some of the terms that we use are not found in the Scriptures precisely. For example, remember the Trinity as one of the clearest of the teachings of Scripture, but the term Trinity is not found in the Bible. One of the clearest teachings is the fact that we have an old nature, but the term old nature is not found in the Bible, new nature is not found in the Bible.

Well we should not be surprised if we should learn that the word providence is not in the Bible, but yet the thought or the teaching is and it surely is. Let me define it. Providence -- and I’d like for you to get this down if you’re taking notes -- providence is the continuing, divine work of preserving all his creation. Providence is the continuing divine work of preserving all his creation, of cooperating in all that comes to pass, and directing all things to their appointed king. Providence is the continuing divine work of preserving all his creation, of cooperating in all that comes to past, and directing all things to their appointed king.

Now before I say a word about this definition, let me point out a theological distinction, which is sometimes made by theologians. They sometimes distinguish between general providence and special providence. By this they mean, general providence is God’s control of the universe as a whole. I said general providence. In other words, he controls everything as a whole. He controls not only things on the earth but the things on the moon, in all of the planets, in all of the galaxies and all of the space about which we don’t know anything. God controls it all, that’s his general providence.

Now his special providence is his control of a unit within the whole in relationship to the whole. In other words, it’s his care for me in the experiences of my life as I participate in the life of this universe. So, general providence and special providence. Now we won’t use the terms anymore, but in case you ever run across those terms that’s the sense in which they’re used. I want to come back to...yes?

[Question from audience]

[Johnson] General providence is God’s control over the universe as a whole. His special providence is his care for each part in relation to the whole.

Now let’s come back to our definition because our definition has been designed to stress three features of providence upon which I want to weigh our greatest stress tonight. You notice I said that providence is the continuing divine work of preserving. Now that’s the first feature of providence I want you to get, preservation. Secondly, of

cooperating in all that comes to pass, that’s the second important thing, cooperation. Or as the theologians like to put it, concurrence C-O-N-C-U-R-R-E-N-C-E [pronounce] CONcurrence, conCURrence. And finally of directing all things to there appointed end, and that is government. So providence comprehends the preservation of all things. It comprehends God’s cooperation in the affairs and events and lives of his universe and comprehends his government of all things so that they reach an appointed end. That is all providence: preservation, cooperation or concurrence, and government. These are the three principal elements in providence.

Now John Wesley used to say, “I read the newspapers to see how God is governing the world.” Now when he said that, he implied that he believed that God was governing the world. And that what we see today or at any time in human history is simply the evidence of the fact that God is on the job. There was never a time when he was inaugurated into office. There was never a time and there never is going to be a time when he retires to his ranch. For some people that’s very good, but for God it is impossible. He always governs the universe. And he is carrying it towards a certain conclusion and, furthermore, we can be sure that we are going to reach that conclusion too.

Regardless of how history rates Lyndon Johnson as a president or how you or I might rate him as a president, all would agree he didn’t accomplish what he hoped to accomplish. And he would be the first to say that’s right. I tried. I did my best. I did better than anybody else, particularly better than any Republican could do, but nevertheless, he failed. And it’s Mr. Nixon’s duty to carry out my progress. You don’t have anything like this in God’s government of the universe.

Now providence refutes the Epicurean notion that the world is governed by chance. Providence says the world is governed by a loving and all-powerful God. The Stoics used to say, the world is governed by fate. Providence is opposed to the Stoic

doctrine as well. Providence is also is opposed to modern science, because modern science says the world is controlled by an ironclad system of law.

Now there’s a great deal of truth in that claim. There are apparently ironclad systems of law but providence states that the world is controlled by God himself, that it is he who has instituted these laws. And that it is he who controls senior operations. And that it is he who uses them to further his own theory. The objects of providence are manifold but they include, first, the universe. Well let’s look at a Scripture or two. Let’s look at Psalm 103, verse 19. Psalm 103, verse 19. The Psalmist writes, this is one of David’s Psalms, verse 19, “The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all.” Notice that. “The Lord has prepared his throne in the heavens. And his kingdom ruleth over all.”

So the universe is included within God’s providence. You might put down also Psalm 104, verse 14. While you put it down, I’ll read it, “He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth,” and that brings us to the second thing that he has included in providence and that is the irrational creation, the animal world. God controls the animal world, Psalm 104, verse 21. Notice that verse, “The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God.” So we read in the Bible that God cares for his universe, and we are to understand that is not only of his whole universe that he controls that, but he also controls his irrational creation, the animal world.

As a matter of fact, there are some striking statements in the Bible, the Genesis, that sometimes the animals had more friends than human beings. The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his master’s crib but Israel does not know. My people, does not consider. And in the book of Joel there’s a very striking picture of the animal world affected by the judgment of God and affected by the disobedience of man; whereas, man is utterly senseless. He’s without understanding. He’s worse than the beasts of the fields. God cares for the irrational creation.

And then thirdly: the rational creation, both nations and men. Let’s just read two verses in Daniel, Daniel chapter 2, verse 21 and Daniel chapter 4, verse 25. Daniel 2, verse 21 and Daniel 4, verse 25. Daniel 2:21 says page 898 in the approved edition of the King James Version revised, “And he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings: he giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding.” And notice chapter 4, verse 25, “That they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and they shall wet thee with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over thee, till thou know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will.” God’s providence controls the actions of all of his rational creation, men and nations.

It was within the providence of God that Richard Nixon become president of the United States of America. He ordained him. As a matter of fact -- the Bible will go so far as to say in connection with this -- Richard Nixon is a minister of God. That’s right, Romans chapter 13, and a minister of God, because he has been ordained by God’s providence to that office of President of the United States of America with all the responsibilities that that office entails. So that providence then includes the universe, the irrational creation and the rational creation. It is all comprehended within in the providential actions of God.

Now, for the remainder of our time, the next twenty minutes, I want to talk about these three ideas of preservation, of cooperation or concurrence, and of government. So in our outline this is Roman I: The doctrine of preservation. The doctrine of preservation. And here we’ll begin with the proof and go on to the proper idea of preservation. The proof of the doctrine of preservation is both direct, that is scriptural and inferential, that is logical. Let’s read. Well we’ve already read it. We could save some time. Remember Colossians chapter 1, verse 17. Colossians 1:17 says, “And in Him

all things hold together.” God through Jesus Christ is the principal of coherence in the universe. He preserves his creation, which he has brought into being by his word.

There was a time when God spoke and he said, “Let there be light and there was light.” And that creation came into existence of light and form and matter and being and life and all of the other things that go to make up God’s creation. But he did not, like a deist, create this and just let it from that time on fend for itself. But he takes upon himself the responsibility of preservation and so all things hold together in him. If, for example, God were not in the very breath that you draw right now, this whole universe would fly into nothing -- I presume. I don’t know enough to know exactly what would happen, but it wouldn’t be like this. Daniel speaks about a God in whose hands my breath is. It is he who gives you this breath that you are breathing now and the next one you can never be sure of. God alone can be sure of that. He controls it all. He preserves his creation, which he has brought into being.

You can put in your notes, if you like, Nehemiah chapter 9, verse 6, which is a favorite text of theologians. Deuteronomy chapter 33, verse 12, verse 25 through verse 28, Genesis chapter 28, verse 15, I like that one myself; if I had time I would expound that one a little. In fact, I have it in red ink in my notes because if I have time I like to expound it, but we don’t have time tonight. So just underline it and look it up for yourself. But not only is the doctrine of providence proved from the Scripture, it is also proved logically or inferentially. It follows from the sovereignty of God.

For example, if God is really sovereign, absolutely sovereign, how can anything be independent of him? If he’s really sovereign, if he really controls everything, how is it possible for anything to be independent of God? On the other hand, it is logical from the dependent nature of man. And this is the other side of that statement. If man is a dependent being, he cannot continue to exist without God. So the idea of a sovereign God implies providence, likens it, but it is stated actually in Scripture.

Now, capital B: The proper idea of this doctrine, what is preservation specifically? Well God’s providence -- or preservation I should say, is his continuous work of maintaining his creation and its endowed property. Preservation is his continuous work of maintaining and its endowed property. That’s preservation. You know it’s a wonderful thing to know that God preserves everything too. It’s a wonderful thing to know that he has called this creation into existence and he is just as concerned and involved in it at this moment as he has always been. He has not brought it into existence and then gone back into his house and sat down in his easy chair and waited to see how things were going to come out.

Now, Roman II: The doctrine of cooperation or concurrence. Now this is all an easy aspect of providence. And those of you who did your outside reading as you should have, you will remember that Professor Berkoff had quite a section on this and some of it was a little difficult to follow. If you had some difficulties, well then that’s probably the way you should have reacted to it. If you had read Hodge on this point, you also would have had a little difficulty because we’re dealing with problems that are exceedingly complex and difficult, but let me try to put it as simply as I can.

Capital A: The proper idea of the doctrine. Cooperation or concurrence is the cooperation of God with all subordinate powers according to preestablished laws of operation, which caused them to act and to act precisely as they do. Cooperation is God’s -- now I didn’t give it that way for [Johnson writes on display, board or overhead unknown] see, I was just going along saying what came to my mind -- but cooperation is the cooperation of God with all subordinate powers according to pre-established laws of cooperation, which cause them to act and to act precisely as they do.

Now the important thing to remember is that second causes in human experience are real and the powers of nature do not work by itself. In other words, God concurs in the actions of his creation. He works in the events of life. He works in the thought of man’s life. He is involved in all of life and in all of life’s events and actions. He concurs

in these actions. He goes along with them. As a matter of fact, if we had time to discuss this, I think we could show that he instigates these things, that he is responsible for them ultimately. That’s a proper idea.

Now the proof of the doctrine, Capital B. The general truth that men are controlled by the will of God is very clear. Now let’s look at a couple of passages that we haven’t looked at so far. Let’s turn to Proverbs chapter 21, verse 1. This is a familiar verse. I think it’s familiar. Well I know it’s familiar with all of you Bible students in this room. Proverbs 21, [Laughter] verse 1. Listen to it, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water,” now, notice, “He turneth it whithersoever he will.” He turneth it whithersoever he will. Now that means that it is God who concurs in all of the thoughts and intentions of men, “He turneth it whithersoever he will.”

Now turn back to Genesis chapter 45, verse 5. Genesis 45, verse 5. [Pause] Are you warm? You’re not? Alright. It’s my solicitous care for you. It’s my concurrence with your feelings. Verse 5 Genesis chapter 45, “Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here (Joseph is speaking), for God sent me before you to preserve life.” Now this is a very interesting thing. What Joseph is saying is that all of the events, which led to his captivity in Egypt, were designed by God for a specific purpose to preserve the life of Israel. So if God concurs in the action of the man, it was God who did. All they said later on willed it. They confessed their sin to Joseph in the fiftieth chapter, but Joseph said it was God who did it. Actually both did it, but it was God who took the initiative. It was God who had plans in Egypt. And so it was he who instigated this. It was he who concurred in the action and -- by the way -- it was an evil action too. It is not above God to concur in the action that is evil, but he may permit that without himself becoming evil in the process. So he concurred in the action.

Now that is concurrence. That’s an aspect of providence. Remember, now we have preservation. He preserves his creation. He concurs or cooperates in all of the life of his creation.

And finally, our third word is government. Now the proper idea of this doctrine, capital A is very simple. Government has to do with the end or aim of God’s works. It is his continued activity whereby he rules everything with a view to the accomplishment of his own purposes. He rules everything with a view to the accomplishment of his purposes, his continuous activity.

Now, the proof of the doctrine: capital B. I just prefer one passage, Hebrews chapter 1, verse 3. This is one of the great texts of the New Testament and in it there is a statement of the government of God. And after I expound this I want to give you an illustration of providence, one perhaps that you’re not familiar with. Hebrews chapter 1, verse 3, “Who (is Jesus Christ) being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power.”

Now that word uphold does not mean -- as those of you who were here when I first began the exposition of Hebrews may remember a long time ago -- that word uphold does not mean that Jesus Christ is some kind of an atlas who holds the weight of the world upon his shoulders, a stationary person who has the globe on the back of his neck. But the word really means “to bear” and is used in the present tense, of course, and it means to bear towards a certain conclusion.

He’s the one who bears all things alone by the word of his power. It is Jesus Christ who is responsible for history in the past and history in the future. He is the Lord of history, all in the past was under his control and he is the Lord of prophecy and, therefore, he can look into the future and know what is going to come to pass because he has designed that it come to pass. And by his own power, he guarantees that it shall come to pass. And so God’s government is his continued activity whereby he brings all things to their sure conclusion and certain conclusion.

Now I want to illustrate providence in a simple experience that occurred in the Old Testament in connection with a woman who is not named in Scripture. She is simply called the woman of Shunem or the Shunammite woman. And it’s not the experience that

we are most familiar with, the experience of the death and restoration of her child by Elisha the Prophet, but it is the experience that occurred afterwards. It’s found in 2 Kings chapter 8, verse 1 through verse 6.

Now let me just try to tell you the story. The woman of Shune had been -- remember -- the object of one of the greatest of the works of the Prophet Elisha. Remember he had frequently visited at her house. As a matter of fact, he had an upper room where he frequently went in to meditate. And by the grace of God, he was able to give her the promise of a child and the child was born. And then one day, the child died. And Elisha by the grace of God was able to bring that child back to life again. Sometime after that, there came a famine in the land, a famine of seven years.

And Elisha warned the woman of Shune that she should get out of the land, to the Philistines. And there she should wait until the seven-year famine was over, which she did. But when she came back -- what often happened in the east in those days -- her land and the products of it had been appropriated by someone else. And so she was advised by the prophet to go to the king and to talk with the king. And so she began her journey with her little boy.

Now where she lived we don’t know precisely, but we know that she began her journey. Elisha had a servant by the name of Gehazi or Gehasi. And Gehazi, it so happened, had a little conversation with the king. And the king asked Gehazi, because he has been the servant of the prophet Elisha, to tell him something about Elisha. In one of the days, Gehazi in the presence of the king -- you can just imagine the great courtroom -- he’s telling the king all about the prophet Elisha and the king is really interested. He should have, of course, known all about it, but often our political leaders are spiritual pygmies and he apparently didn’t know a whole lot about the prophet Elisha.

And so I could just imagine that Gehazi would tell him about the healing of the waters of Jericho. He would tell him about the judgment upon the forty-two children at Bethel. He would tell him about the increase of oil in the house of the prophet’s widow.

And then he came to the story of the woman of Shune. And I think it must have been a rather lengthy story because there’s a lot in the Bible about her, one long chapter. All the time the woman of Shune is making her way towards the king with her little child to ask about her home and about the product of her farm. And apparently as Gehazi is telling the story to the king, the woman of Shune arrives in the city. And as he continues to tell the story, she moves towards the king’s palace. And he still continues about the woman when she arrives at the palace.

And I’m assuming it’s about this time that he launches in the story of the birth of the boy and how the boy was lost and died, and how Elisha, in this mighty exhibition of the power of God, raised him to life. And about this time there was a knock on the king’s door, and someone came in and said, “There’s a woman, a Shune, to see you with a little boy.” And the king said, “Come on in.”

And Gehazi, I presume, at that point had gone over and taken his stand by [indistinct], waiting for the king to handle his business so he can continue the story of Elisha. And as the woman comes in the room, he hears some familiar sound, her voice. And he looks at her and it’s been apparently, at least, seven years since he’s seen her and he looks and hears her unfold her story. He sees the little boy who’s now of some size and suddenly as recognition finally dawns upon him at the completion of the story, he shouts out to the king, “My lord, O king, this is the woman and this is her son whom Elisha restored to life.” And at the precise moment as Gehazi told this wonderful story to the king, here appears the woman.

Now you could just imagine how interested the king is and he says, “Why are you here.” She said, “Well I went into the land of the Philistines, someone came appropriated my property and has taken all of the produce of it.” And the king said to one of his officers, “Restore all that was hers, all the fruits of the fields as the day that she left the land even until now, give it all back to her, and not only give it back to her but give every bit of produce back from it, for all the time since she left that land.”

You know what I think she went out talking about? Preservation, concurrence and government, the providence of God. Not an accident, not it just happened, it was God’s providence. No other comforting thing there is to know that all of the affairs of life are governed by providence. And then when we talk about the activity of the Holy Spirit, in addition, the great consolation of saints of God has. Let’s close in prayer.

[Prayer] Father we thank Thee for Thy word. Bless these great truths to our hearts. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.