

# PROVIDENCE

by

John Calvin

That God can do whatsoever he pleases is a doctrine of great importance, provided it be truly and legitimately applied. This caution is necessary because curious and forward persons, as is usual with them, take the liberty of abusing a sound doctrine by producing it in defense of their frantic reveries. And in this matter we daily witness too much of the wildness of human ingenuity. This mystery, which ought to command our admiration and awe, is by many shamelessly and irreverently made a topic of idle talk. If we would derive advantage from this doctrine, we must attend to the import of God's doing whatsoever he pleases in heaven and on the earth.

And, first, God has all power for the preservation of his Church and for providing for her welfare; and, secondly, all creatures are under his control, and therefore nothing can prevent him from accomplishing all his purposes. However much, then, the faithful may find themselves cut off from all means of subsistence and safety, they ought nevertheless to take courage from the fact that God is not only superior to all impediments, but that he can render them subservient to the advancement of his own design. This too must also be borne in mind, that all events are the result of God's appointment alone, and that nothing happens by chance. This much it was proper to promise respecting the use of this doctrine, that we may be prevented from forming unworthy conceptions of the glory of God, as men of wild imaginations are wont to do. Adopting this principle, we ought not to be ashamed frankly to acknowledge that God, by his eternal counsel, manages all things in such a manner that nothing can be done but by his will and appointment.

From this passage [Psalm 115] Augustine very properly and ingeniously shows that those events which appear to us unreasonable not only occur simply by the permission of God, but also by his will and decree. For if our God does whatsoever pleases him, why should he permit that to be done which he does not wish? Why does he not restrain the devil and all the wicked who set themselves in opposition to him? If he be regarded as occupying an intermediate position between doing and suffering so as to tolerate what he does not wish, then, according to the fancy of the Epicureans, he will remain unconcerned in the heavens. But if we admit that God is invested with prescience, that he superintends and governs the world which he has made and that he does not overlook any part of it, it must follow that everything which takes place is done according to his will.

Those who speak as if this would be to render God the author of evil are perverse disputants. Filthy dogs though they be, yet they will not, by their barking, be able to substantiate a charge of lying against the prophet or to take the government of the world out of God's hand. If nothing occurs unless by the counsel and determination of God, he apparently does not disallow sin. He has, however, secret and to us unknown causes why he permits that which perverse men do; and yet this is not done because he approves of their wicked inclinations.

It was the will of God that Jerusalem should be destroyed. The Chaldeans also wished

the same thing, but after a different manner. And though he frequently calls the Babylonians his stipendiary soldiers and says that they were stirred up by him (Isa. 5:26), and farther, that they were the sword of his own hand, yet we would not therefore call them his allies inasmuch as their object was very different. In the destruction of Jerusalem God's justice would be displayed, while the Chaldeans would be justly censured for their lust, covetousness, and cruelty.

Hence, whatever takes place in the world is according to the will of God, and yet it is not his will that any evil should be done. For however incomprehensible his counsel may be to us, still it is always based upon the best of reasons. Satisfied with his will alone, so as to be fully persuaded that notwithstanding the great depth of his judgments (Ps. 36:6) they are characterized by the most consummate rectitude, this ignorance will be far more learned than all the acumen of those who presume to make their own capacity the standard by which to measure his works.

On the other hand, it is deserving of notice that if God does whatsoever he pleases, then it is not his pleasure to do that which is not done. The knowledge of this truth is of great importance because it frequently happens, when God winks and holds his peace at the afflictions of the Church, that we ask why he permits her to languish since it is in his power to render her assistance. Avarice, fraud, perfidy, cruelty, ambition, pride, sensuality, drunkenness, and, in short, every species of corruption in these times is rampant in the world, all which would instantly cease did it seem good to God to apply the remedy. Wherefore, if he at any time appears to us to be asleep, or has not the means of succouring us, let this tend to make us wait patiently; and to teach us that it is not his pleasure to act so speedily the part of our deliverer, because he knows that delay and procrastination are profitable to us; it being his will to wink at and tolerate for a while what assuredly, were it his pleasure, he could instantly rectify.

From *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. 6, pg. 344-346.