

The Providence of God

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*,
trans. Rev. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), Vol. I, 549; Vol. III, 42-44, emphasis
added, English updated.

Psalm 33:13-15

13 The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men.
14 From the place of His dwelling He looks On all the inhabitants of the earth;
15 He fashions their hearts individually; He considers all their works.

13. *The LORD looked down from heaven.* The Psalmist still proceeds with the same doctrine, namely, **that human affairs are not tossed here and there fortuitously [by accident or chance], but that God secretly guides and directs all that we see taking place.**

Now he here commends God's inspection of all things, that we on our part may learn to behold, and to contemplate with the eye of faith, **His invisible providence.** There are, no doubt, evident proofs of it continually before our eyes; but the great majority of men, notwithstanding, see nothing of them, and, in their blindness, imagine that all things are under the conduct of a blind fortune.

Nay, the more plenteously and abundantly that He sheds His goodness upon us, the less do we raise our thoughts to Him, but preposterously settle them down immovably on the external circumstances which surround us.

The prophet here rebukes this base conduct, because no greater affront can be offered to God than to shut Him up in heaven in a state of idleness. This is the same as if He were to lie buried in a grave. What kind of life would God's life be, if He neither saw nor took care of anything?

Under the term *throne*, too, the sacred writer shows, from what is implied in it, what an absurd infatuation it is to divest God of thought and understanding. He gives us to understand by this word, that **heaven is** not a palace in which God remains idle and indulges in pleasures, as the Epicureans dream, but **a royal court, from which He exercises His government over all parts of the world.**

If He has erected His throne, therefore, in the sanctuary of heaven, in order to govern the universe, it follows that He in no wise neglects the affairs of earth, but governs them with the highest reason and wisdom.

Psalm 68:31-35

31 Envoys will come out of Egypt; Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God.
32 Sing to God, you kingdoms of the earth; Oh, sing praises to the Lord, Selah
33 To Him who rides on the heaven of heavens, *which were* of old! Indeed, He sends out His voice, a mighty voice.
34 Ascribe strength to God; His excellence *is* over Israel, And His strength *is* in the clouds.
35 O God, *You are* more awesome than Your holy places. The God of Israel *is* He who gives strength and power to *His* people. Blessed *be* God!

That it might not seem a strange and incredible thing to speak of the extension of the worship of God from one land, within which it had been up until now confined, to the whole world, David insists on God's rightful dominion over all parts of the earth. *He rides upon the heaven of heavens*; that is, as we have observed at the beginning of the psalm, **He has supreme power over all creatures, and governs the universe at his will.** This truth is one which, even in its

general application, is well fitted to beget a reverential consideration of the majesty of God; but we must not overlook the more particular reason for which it is here introduced. Mention having been made of **the Gentiles**, who lay as yet outside the pale of the Church, He proves them to be embraced in the government of God by virtue of **His sovereignty as Creator**, and intimates that there was nothing wonderful in the fact, that He who sits upon the heavens should comprehend the whole inhabitants of the earth under His sway. By the *heavens of ancient times*, it is meant to intimate **that the whole human family were under His power from the very beginning.**

We have a signal proof of the glorious power of God in the fact, that, notwithstanding the immensity of the fabric of the heavens, the rapidity of their motion, and the conflicting revolutions which take place in them, the most perfect subordination and harmony are preserved; and that this fair and beautiful order has been uninterruptedly maintained for ages.

It is apparent then how **the ancientness of the heavens may commend to us the singular excellency of the handiwork of God.** Having touched on the work of creation, he particularizes *thunder*, for this is what he intends by a *mighty voice*, as in Psalm 29:4. There are two constructions which we may put upon the words used, either that by His voice of command He calls forth the thunders which shake heaven and earth with the loudness of their sound, or that He sends forth His mighty voice in the thunder. I have already shown, at some length, in commenting on the other passage just quoted, that there is a propriety in God's being represented as *thundering*; for the phenomenon is one which, more than any other, impresses an awe upon the spirits of men. And the words are introduced with the exclamation *lo!* or *behold!* the better to arrest our wandering thoughts, or rather to reprehend our security.

34. Give strength unto God over Israel. The expression is in allusion to the sentence which went before, and in which God was said to send forth a strong or mighty voice. Not that, properly speaking, we can give anything to Him, but, disposed as we are to withhold that honor which is His due, David subjoins to what he had said of His thundering with a mighty voice, an injunction that we should, on our part, be ready to sound forth His praises. To guard the Gentile nations against those false ideas upon religion in which they were accustomed to indulge, he brings them back to the doctrine of the Law, in which God had specially revealed Himself, and intimates that, if they would not lose themselves in error, they must advance by necessary steps from the creation and government of the world, to that doctrine in which God had condescended to make a familiar revelation of Himself to men. So much is included when God is spoken of here as *the God of Israel*. But he does not satisfy himself with enjoining them to celebrate the power of God with praises of the voice. He exhorts them to the exercise of faith, for in reality we cannot better ascribe strength unto God, than by reposing in His protection as all-sufficient.

Thus, after having said that *His strength is in the clouds*; he adds, that *He is terrible out of His holy places*, by which is meant, that **He exerts a power in His temple which is sufficient to confound His enemies.** Some understand heaven and earth to be the *holy places* intended, but this does not agree with the context, for it is immediately added, that *the God of Israel* would give strength to His people. It is evident, therefore, that the Psalmist speaks of **God's protection of His Church.** The plural number is used in speaking of the sanctuary, here as in other places, because the tabernacle was divided into three parts. He points, in short, to the ark of the covenant, as that which the believing people of God should recognize as a symbol of confidence, remembering the promise, "I will dwell in the midst of you," and thus resting with security under the wings of the Divine protection, and confidently calling upon His name. Any right which Israel might have in distinction from others to trust in the guardianship of God, rested entirely upon that covenant of free grace by which they had been chosen to be God's peculiar heritage. Let it be remembered, however, that God continues to exert in behalf of His Church still these terrible displays of His power of which the Psalmist speaks.