

God's Eternal Decrees and Providence

Lamentations 3:37-39

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and Lamentations*, trans. Rev. John Owen (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. V, 426-432, emphasis added; updated to modern American English.

Lamentations 3:37-38

"Who is He who speaks, and it comes to pass, when the Lord has not commanded it? *Is it* not out of the mouth of the Most High that evil and good proceed?"

The Prophet, after having mentioned the blasphemy which prevailed everywhere at that time, strongly condemns so gross a stupidity. *Who is this?* he says. He checks such madness by a sharp rebuke—for the question implies an astonishment, as though the Prophet had said, that it was like a prodigy to find men who imagined that God was content with His own leisure and exercised no care over the world; for this was to annihilate Him altogether. God is not a dead being, He is not a spectre [ghost]; what then? God is the judge of the world.

We hence see that it was a monstrous thing, when men entertained the notion that God is idle or forgetful, that He gives up the world to chance. This is the reason why the Prophet asks as of a thing absurd and extremely disgraceful. *Who is this?* he says; Could it be that men should give themselves up to such a degree of madness? For when they said, that anything could happen without God's command, it was the same as if they denied His power; for what is God without His judgment?

The other verse may be explained in two ways; but as to the meaning, there is but little difference. It may, then, be read as a question, "Cannot good and evil proceed from the mouth of the Most High?" or it may be rendered thus, "As though good and evil should not proceed from the mouth of God." As to the substance of what is said, we see that there is no need of disputing, for the Prophet confirms what he had said, that men are to be abhorred who imagine God to be as it were dead and thus rob Him of His power and of His office as a judge.

And, doubtless, except we hold this truth, no true religion can exist in us; for except all the sayings and doings of men come to an account before the tribunal of God, and also their motives and thoughts, there will be first no faith and, secondly, there will be no integrity, and all prayer to God will be extinguished. For if we believe that God does not regard what is done in the world, who will trust in Him? and who will seek help from Him? besides, who will hesitate to abandon himself to cruelty, or frauds, or plunder?

Extinguished, then, is every sense of religion by this impious opinion, that God spends His time leisurely in heaven, and attends not to human affairs. This is the reason why the Prophet is so indignant against those who said, that anything could be done without the command of God.

Let us now see **how God commands what is wrongly and foolishly done by men.** Surely He does not command the ungodly to do what is wicked, for He would thus render them excusable; for where God's authority interposes, there no blame can be. **But God is said to command whatever He has decreed, according to His hidden**

counsel. There are, then, two kinds of commands; one belongs to doctrine, and the other to the hidden judgments of God. The command of doctrine, so to speak, is an evident approbation which acquits men; for when one obeys God, it is enough that he has God as his authority, though he were condemned by a hundred worlds. Let us, then, learn to be attentive to **the commands of doctrine**, by which we ought to regulate our life, for **they make up the only true rule**, from which it is not right to depart.

But God is said to command according to His secret decrees what He does not approve, as far as men are concerned. So Shimei had a command to curse, and yet he was not exempt from blame; for it was not his purpose to obey God; no, [rather] he thought that he had offended God no less than David (2 Samuel 16:5, 6).

Then this distinction ought to be understood, that **some things are commanded by God, not that men may have it as a rule of action, but when God executes His secret judgments by ways unknown to us.** Thus, then, ought this passage to be understood, even that **nothing is carried on without God's command, that is, without His decree**, and, as they say, without His ordination.

There are no random events or accidents, from God's perspective.

It hence appears, that those things which seem contingent, are yet ruled by **the certain providence of God**, so that **nothing is done at random**. And what philosophers call accident, or contingent, (*εὐδεχόμενον*) is necessary as to God; for **God decreed before the world was made whatever He was to do; so that there is nothing now done in the world which is not directed by His counsel**. And true is that saying in the Psalms, that our God is in heaven, and He does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3); but this would not be true, were not all things dependent on God's counsel.

We hence see that **nothing is contingent, for everything that takes place flows from the eternal and immutable counsel of God**. It is indeed true, that those things which take place in this or that manner, are properly and naturally called contingencies, but what is naturally contingent, is necessary, as far as it is directed by God; no, what is carried on by the counsel and will of men is necessary.

Philosophers think that all things are contingent (*εὐδεχόμενα*) and why? because the will of man may turn either way. They then, conclude, that whatever men do is contingent, because he who wills may change his will. These things are true, when we consider the will of man in itself, and the exercise of it; but **when we raise our eyes to the secret providence of God, who turns and directs the counsels of men according to His own will, it is certain that how much soever men may change in their purposes, yet God never changes**.

Let us then hold this doctrine, that **nothing is done except by God's command and ordination**, and, with the Holy Spirit, regard with abhorrence those profane men who imagine that God sits idly as it were on His watchtower and takes no notice of what is done in the world, and that human affairs change at random, and that men turn and change independently on any higher power. Nothing is more diabolical than this delirious impiety; for as I have said, it extinguishes all the acts and duties of religion; for there will be no faith, no prayer, no patience, in short, no religion, except we believe and know that God exercises such care over the world, of which He is the Creator, that **nothing happens except through His certain and unchangeable decree**.

God ordains evil, but He is not the author (or authorizer) of evils.

Now they who object and say that God is thus made the author of evils, may be easily refuted; for nothing is more preposterous than to measure the incomprehensible judgment of God by our contracted minds. The Scripture cries aloud that **the judgments of God are a great deep**; it exhorts us to reverence and sobriety, and Paul does not in vain exclaim that the ways of God are unsearchable (Romans 11:33). As, then, God's judgments in their height far surpass all our thoughts, we ought to beware of audacious presumption and curiosity; for the more audacious a man becomes, the farther God withdraws from him. **This, then, is our wisdom, to embrace only what the Scripture teaches.**

God does not approve of moral evil.

Now, when it teaches us that nothing is done except through the will of God, it does not speak indiscriminately, as though God approved of murders, and thefts, and sorceries, and adulteries; what then? even that God by His just and righteous counsel so orders all things, that He still does not will iniquity and abhors all injustice. When, therefore, adulteries, and murders, and plunders are committed, God applies, as it were, a bridle to all those things, and how much soever the most wicked may indulge themselves in their vices, He still rules them; this they themselves acknowledge; but for what end does He rule them? even that He may punish sins with sins, as Paul teaches us, for he says that; God gives up to a reprobate mind those who deserve such a punishment, that He gives them up to disgraceful lusts, that He blinds more and more the despisers of His word. (Romans 1:28; 2 Thessalonians 2:10). And then God has various ways, and those innumerable and unknown to us.

Let us then learn not to subject God to our judgment, but adore His judgments, though they surpass our comprehension; and since the cause of them is hid from us, our highest wisdom is modesty and sobriety.

Thus we see that **God is not the author of evils, though nothing happens but by His nod and through His will**—for far different is His design from that of wicked men. Then absurd would it be to implicate Him as an associate in the same crime, when a murderer, or a thief, or an adulterer is condemned—and why? because God has no participation in thefts and adulteries; but the vices of men are in a way wonderful and incomprehensible as His judgments. In a word, as far as the heavens are from the earth, so great is the difference between the works of God and the deeds of men, for the ends, as I have said, are altogether different.

The Prophet says that *from the mouth of the Most High proceed good and evil*. By "mouth" he means His decree. God indeed does not always declare that He is a judge; He has often executed punishment on the wicked, as it were, in silence; for there were no prophets among the heathens to proclaim the judgments He brought on them. But though God does not always speak when He punishes the wickedness of men, it is yet said that good and evil proceed from His mouth; because He allots to men their punishment as it seems good to Him; and then He spares others or bears with them for a time. It follows, —

Lamentations 3:39

“Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?”

. . . Moses meant that the people were wearied, so that they in a manner pined away; and this meaning is the most suitable here. For the Prophet had before rebuked those who imagined that God, having relinquished the care of the world, led an inactive and easy life in heaven; but now, in order to rouse the minds of all, He points out the remedy for this madness, even that men should not willingly weary themselves in their sins, but acknowledge that their wickedness is shown to them whenever any adversity comes upon them.

And surely men would not be so infatuated as to exclude God from the government of the world, were they to know themselves and seriously to call to mind their own deeds and words; for God would soon exhibit to them sure and notorious examples of His judgment. From where does it come then that we are so dull and stupid in considering the works of God? no, even that we think that God is like a spectre [ghost] or an idol? even because we rot in our sins and contract a voluntary dullness; for we champ the bit, according to the old proverb.

We now, then, perceive why the Prophet joins this sentence, *Why does a living man weary himself? and a man in his sins?* for as long as men thus remain in their own dregs, they will never acknowledge God as the judge of the world, and thus they always go astray through their own perverse imaginations. If, then, we wish to dissipate all the mists which prevent us from seeing God's providence (that is, by the eyes of faith) let every one be his own witness and the judge of his own life, and carefully examine himself; it will then immediately occur to us, that **God is not without reason angry with us**, and that we are afflicted with so many adversities, because our sins will come forth before us.

We here see the cause of that madness which makes men to exclude God's providence from human affairs, even because they look not on themselves, but torment themselves without any benefit and become wearied in their sins, and do not raise up their eyes to God. The rest, connected with our subject, I must defer till to-morrow.

PRAYER

Grant, Almighty God, that as we are at this day tossed here and there by so many troubles, and almost all things in the world are in confusion, so that wherever we turn our eyes, nothing but thick darkness meets us—O grant that we may learn to surmount all obstacles, and to raise our eyes by faith above the world, so that we may acknowledge that governed by Your wonderful counsel is everything that seems to us to happen by chance, in order that we may seek You, and know that help will be ready for us through Your mercy whenever we humbly seek the pardon of our sins, through Christ Jesus our Lord. — Amen.