

God's Providence, Predestination, and Free Will

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PSALM 105

PSALM 105:16-19

16. And He called a famine upon the land; He broke the whole staff of bread.

17. He sent a man before them; Joseph was sold for a slave.

18. They afflicted his feet in the stocks: the iron entered into his soul.

19. Until the time that his word came; the word of the LORD tried him.

God sends famine and drought.

16. *And He called a famine upon the land.* Here the inspired writer recounts a most illustrious proof of divine providence towards the chosen people, at the time when the covenant might seem to be void and disannulled. The inheritance of the land of Canaan (as has been stated above) was added, as an earnest or pledge for confirmation. The descent of Jacob into Egypt, which deprived his house of the sight of the land, could not make the covenant to perish. In this the constancy of God shone forth the brighter; yes, by this trial he manifested more plainly how provident a father He was in preserving the seed of Abraham. But it is better to consider each particular in the verse.

In the first place, it is taught, that **the famine** which drove Jacob into Egypt **did not happen by chance**. Although only one particular famine is here treated of, it is to be held as a general principle, that **there is no other cause of any scarcity of sustenance except this, that God, in withdrawing His hand, takes away the means of support**. The curse of God is expressed more emphatically, when it is said, that *the famine was called*; as if it were ready at His command, as a minister of His wrath.

By this we are instructed, that famine, pestilence, and other scourges of God, do not visit men by chance, but are directed by His hand to wherever it pleases Him, and are obedient to His will. The manner in which the famine was called is next stated, namely, when He *broke the staff of bread*. The metaphor of *staff* is very appropriate; for God has put into bread the power and property of strengthening man, by a secret virtue which fits it to sustain us. So long as it pleases Him to nourish us by such means, a staff as it were lies hidden within it. This staff is broken in two ways; either, first, when He takes away the supply of grain necessary for our nourishment, the sense in which it seems to be used in Ezekiel: "Moreover, He said unto me, Son of man, behold, I will break the staff of bread in Jerusalem, and they shall eat bread by weight, and with care; and they shall drink water by measure, and with astonishment" (Ezekiel 4:16); or, secondly, when He breathes in anger upon the bread itself, so that those who would satisfy themselves by devouring it, instead of having their hunger thereby removed, remain famished still. And certainly to the barrenness of the earth this second is commonly added, namely, that He takes away the sustaining power which is in bread; for, as it is declared in Deuteronomy 8:3, bread does not give life of itself, but borrows its secret virtue from the mouth of God.

God's Providence

17. *He sent a man before them.* This whole passage graphically teaches us, that **whatever befell that people was by the hand and counsel of God.** The simple recital would have been to say, that the famine came upon the land, after Joseph had been sold by his brethren, and carried into Egypt. But the prophet speaks emphatically, declaring that Joseph by the divine counsel had been sent before into Egypt, to support his father's house, that afterwards the famine was called, and that then, **by God's providence, a remedy was presented beyond all hope.** This, indeed, is generally true in human affairs; but there is here commemorated a special care which God took in governing and nourishing His Church. Moreover, the prophet mentions that as second in place which was first in the order of time. Accordingly, in regard to the word *send*, the pluperfect tense would better express the sense, He *had sent*; implying that before God afflicted the land of Canaan with famine, He had prepared a remedy for His servant Jacob, and for his household, in having sent Joseph before as a steward to provide them with food.

Here two contraries as it were are stated, to render the divine superintendence in the whole the more conspicuous. How was Joseph sent of God? It was in this way: When he was doomed to death, it happened that his brethren preferred selling him to leaving him in his grave. This selling, if considered merely by itself, like a cloud interposed, obscured and concealed **the divine providence.** When counsel was taken to put Joseph to death, who would have expected that he was to be the sustainer of his father's house? Afterwards a kind of death was devised for him less cruel; but then he was cast into a well or pit, and in that situation how could he succor others? The last hope was, that at length being sold, he came forth from the pit. But again, he was well near rotting all his life long in prison.

Who could think that processes so intricate and circuitous were **controlled by divine providence?** The prophet therefore meets this difficulty by saying, that in respect of men, he was indeed *sold*; but that **he had nevertheless been previously sent by the divine purpose.** The passage is worthy of notice, admirably vindicating, as it does, the providence of God against the perverse stupidity of our corrupt nature.

Things do not happen by chance, but rather by God's secret working.

Resting on the second causes which meet the eye, or ascribing to the direction of man whatever is done in this world, or thinking that all things happen by chance, **very few trace them to the appointment of God.** And yet the selling of Joseph is not here interposed as a veil to hide divine providence; but is rather set forth as a signal instance of it to teach us that **whatever men may undertake, the issues [results] are in the hand of God;** or rather, that **by a secret influence, He bends the hearts of men in whatever direction He pleases, that by their instrumentality, whether they will or not, He may bring to pass what He has determined should be done.**

God directs and controls all that comes to pass.

Agreeably to this Joseph said to his brethren, "Now, therefore, be not grieved nor angry with yourselves that you sold me here; for God did send me before you to preserve life" (Genesis 45:5). Farther, **God so governs human affairs by His secret controlling influence, and overrules men's wicked devices to a right end, as that His**

judgments are notwithstanding uncontaminated by the depravity of men. The brethren of Joseph wickedly conspire his death; they also wrongfully sell him; the fault is in themselves. **Contemplate now how God directs and controls all.** By the hand of these brethren He provides for the good both of themselves and of their father Jacob, yes for that of the whole Church. This holy purpose contracts no defilement or spot from the malice of those who aimed at an entirely opposite end; even as Joseph testified afterwards, "But as for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:20).

18. They afflicted his feet in the fetters. It is not without cause that the Psalmist prosecutes the winding course of Jacob's early history, which might so confuse the minds of men as to prevent them from directing their attention to the counsel of God. What seemed less likely than to believe that God, by so directly opposite and circuitous a path, meant to accomplish what He had purposed? But **His providence**, by surmounting so many obstacles, is brought out more conspicuously, than if He had despatched [completed] the whole matter by a short and easy road. Had Joseph, as soon as he arrived in Egypt, been presented to the king, and made its governor, the way to what followed would have been easy. But when he was carried away to prison, and lay there separated from the society of men, living as one half-dead; and when his becoming known to the king was a long time subsequent to this, and beyond all expectation, such a sudden change renders the miracle much more evident. This circuitous course then, which the prophet recounts, serves not a little to illustrate the subject in hand. Joseph was many times dead before he was sold. Hence it follows, that God as often showed His care of His Church by delivering him who might be termed her father.

When after, having been brought into Egypt, Joseph was conveyed from hand to hand till he descended into another grave, is it not the more clearly manifest from this that **God, while He seems to be asleep in heaven, is all the while keeping the strictest watch over His servants**, and that He is carrying forward His purpose more effectually by these various windings, than if He had gone straight forward, yes, than if He had run with rapid pace? For this reason the prophet affirms that *his feet were afflicted in the fetters*; a fact which, although not stated in the narrative of Moses, he speaks of as well known. And no doubt, many things were delivered by tradition to the Jews of which no mention is made in the Scriptures. It is also probable enough, that, instead of being put at first under mild restraint, as was afterwards the case, he was rigorously confined. Whether we read, *his soul entered into the iron*, or *the iron entered into his soul*, the meaning, which, in either case, is exactly the same, amounts to this, that the holy man was so galled with fetters, that it seemed as if his life had been given over to the sword. From which it follows, that the safety of his life was as hopeless as the restoration of life to a dead body.

19. Until the time that his word came. Here the prophet teaches, that although, according to the judgment of the flesh, God seems to be too tardy in His steps, yet **He holds supreme rule over all things, that He may at length accomplish in due time what He has determined.** As to the term *word*, it is here doubtless to be taken, not for doctrine or instruction, but for a heavenly decree. The relative *his* admits of being understood as well of God Himself as of Joseph; but its application to the latter appears to me to be preferable, implying that Joseph remained in prison until the issue of his affliction was manifested, which was hidden in the divine purpose.

Not fortune or luck or fate.

It is always to be kept in mind, that the prophet calls back the minds of men from that impious imagination, which would represent fortune as exercising a blind and capricious control over human affairs. Since nothing could be more involved in uncertainty than the welfare of the Church, while Joseph was accounted as a condemned person, the prophet here elevates our minds, and bids us look at the hidden word, that is, the decree, the proper opportunity and time for the manifestation of which had not yet arrived.

After the same manner I explain what follows, *the word of God tried him*. To expound it of Joseph's prophesying, as many do, seems too refined. Until the happy issue appeared, which God kept long hidden and in suspense, Joseph's patience was severely tried. What worldly men, who acknowledge not God to be the Governor of human affairs, call *fate*, the prophet distinguishes by a more appropriate name, terming it *word*, and the word of each man. Nor do I see any impropriety in using the French word *destinée*. When the Stoics dispute, or rather babble, about destiny, they not only involve themselves and the thing also of which they treat in intricate mazes, but, at the same time, involve in perplexity an indubitable truth; for in imagining a concatenation [series] of causes, they divest God of the government of the world. It is an impious invention so to link together causes, interwoven with each other, as that God Himself should be tied to them.

Our faith then ought to mount up to His secret counsel, by which, uncontrolled, He directs all things to their end. This passage also teaches us that God will continue the afflictions of the godly only until they are thereby thoroughly proved.

PSALM 105:20-24

- 20.** The king sent and loosed him; even the ruler of the people, and set him free.
- 21.** He made him lord over his house; and ruler over all his substance:
- 22.** To bind his princes at his pleasure; and to teach his elders wisdom.
- 23.** And Israel came into Egypt; and Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham.
- 24.** And He greatly increased His people, and multiplied them above their oppressors.

The deliverance of Joseph was by God's sovereign decree.

20. *The king sent and loosed him.* The Psalmist celebrates in high terms the deliverance of Joseph; for **God's singular power** was conspicuously displayed in a matter so incredible. What is of more rare occurrence than for a most powerful monarch to bring a stranger out of prison to constitute him ruler over his whole kingdom, and to raise him to a rank of honor, second only to himself? The phrase in verse 22, *to bind his princes*, is commonly explained as implying that Joseph was invested with the chief sovereignty in the administration of the government, so that he could cast into prison, at his pleasure, even the nobles of the realm. . . . But I am surprised that neither of them [various interpreters] have perceived the metaphor contained in this word, which is, that Joseph held the lords of Egypt bound to him at his pleasure, or subject to his power. What is here spoken of is not fetters, but the bond or obligation of obedience, both the princes and all others being dependent on his will. The expression, which is added a little after, *to teach his elders wisdom*, evinces that Joseph did not bear sway like a tyrant, difficult and rare a thing as it is for men, when invested with sovereign power, not to give loose reins to their own humor: but that he was a rule and a pattern, even to the chief of them,

in the high degree of discretion which he exemplified in the administering the affairs of state.

23. *And Israel came into Egypt.* The prophet does not rehearse the whole history, nor was this necessary. He only presents to our view how **divine providence** was concerned in it, which very few consider in reading the narrative of Moses.

He accordingly declares, that after Joseph had been sent before into Egypt, to be the means of supporting his father and the whole family, Jacob then came into Egypt, that is, he did so when all things were admirably arranged, that he might find abundance of bread among a people, the proudest of the whole world, when all others were perishing for lack of food. From this it appears, that what is accounted to be slowness in God, tends to no other end than to accomplish His work on the best possible occasion.

God is supernatural; He can work above the common laws of nature and perform the miraculous.

24. *And He greatly increased His people.* The singular favor of God towards His Church is now commended by the additional circumstance, that within a short space of time, the chosen people increased beyond the common proportion. In this matter the wonderful blessing of God was strikingly displayed. So much the more offensive then is the barking of some dogs, who insolently scoff at the account given by Moses of the multiplying of the people, because it goes far beyond what takes place in the ordinary course of things. Had the people increased only at the common rate, these persons would have immediately objected, that therein no work of God was to be seen. Thus the object which they pursue by their cavillings is nothing else than to make it to be believed, that the blessing of God had no connection with the case. But **we, who are persuaded that it is unwarrantable for us to measure God's power according to our own understandings, or according to what happens by the common law of nature, reverently admire this extraordinary work of His hand.**

The subsequent clause is a little obscure, especially if we read, *The people were strengthened*; for the prophet does not seem to refer to that period when the Israelites lived at ease and in prosperity, but to the time when they were contemptuously and barbarously dealt with as slaves. We may, however, understand the language as spoken by anticipation—as pointing to what was to happen. In the following verse, it is affirmed, that the Egyptians having changed their mind, began to treat the people with cruelty. Although then the Egyptians did not as yet openly exercise their cruelty against the people, when they were increasing both in number and strength, yet the prophet calls them persecutors. It is certain, that the Israelites, even when they were oppressed as slaves, were a terror to their enemies; and Moses plainly affirms (Exodus 1:12) that when they were under tyranny and wrongful oppression, it was still abundantly manifest, that the blessing of God rested upon them.

Predestination and God's Providence

PSALM 105:25-26

25. He turned their heart, so that they hated His people, and dealt craftily with His servants. **26.** He sent Moses His servant; Aaron whom He had chosen.

25. He turned their heart, so that they hated His people. The Egyptians, though at first kind and courteous hosts to the Israelites, became afterwards cruel enemies; and **this also the prophet ascribes to the counsel of God.** They were undoubtedly driven to this by a perverse and malignant spirit, by pride and covetousness; but **still such a thing did not happen without the providence of God, who in an incomprehensible manner so accomplishes His work in the reprobate, as that He brings forth light even out of darkness.** The form of expression seems to some a little too harsh, and therefore they translate the verb passively, *their (i.e., the Egyptians') hearts were turned.* But this is poor, and does not suit the context; for we see that it is the express object of the inspired writer to put the whole government of the Church under God, so that nothing **may happen but according to His will.** If the delicate ears of some are offended at such doctrine, let it be observed, that the Holy Spirit unequivocally affirms in other places as well as here, that **the minds of men are driven here and there by a secret impulse** (Proverbs 21:1), **so that they can neither will nor do any thing except as God pleases.**

Why do the world and so many professing Christians despise this Biblical teaching?

What madness is it to embrace nothing but what commends itself to human reason? What authority will God's word have, if it is not admitted any farther than we are inclined to receive it? Those then who reject this doctrine, because it is not very agreeable to the human understanding, are inflated with a perverse arrogance. Others malignantly misrepresent it, not through ignorance or by mistake, but only that they may excite commotion in the Church, or to bring us into odium among the ignorant. Some over-timid persons could wish, for the sake of peace, that this doctrine were buried. They are surely ill qualified for composing differences. This was the very cause why in former times the doctors of the Church, in their writings, swerved from the pure and genuine truths of the gospel, and turned aside to a heathen philosophy. From where originated **the doctrine of free-will**, from where that of **the righteousness of works**, but because these good fathers were afraid of giving occasion to evil-tongued or malignant men if they freely professed what is contained in the sacred Scriptures?

God chose Augustine to shine as a light in the darkness, as he proclaimed the truth of God's sovereignty.

And had not God, as it were by a strong hand, prevented **Augustine**, he would, in this respect, have been exactly like the rest. But God, so to speak, polishing him with a hammer, corrected that foolish wisdom, which rears its crest against the Holy Spirit.

Not a bare permission, but rather an active predestinating on God's part

The Holy Spirit, we see, affirms that **the Egyptians were so wicked, that God turned their hearts to hate His people.** The middle-scheme men (e.g., Semi-Pelagians) seek to evade and qualify this statement, by saying, that His turning their hearts, denotes His permitting this; or, that when the Egyptians set their hearts upon hating the Israelites, He made use of their malice, as what, so to speak, came accidentally in His way; as if the Holy Spirit, from being defective in the power of language, spoke one thing, when He meant another.

How can we make sense of such a predestination?

If the doctrine of this text, at first sight, seem strange to us, let us remember that God's judgments, in other places, are justly called "*unsearchable*" (Romans 11:33) and "a great deep" (Psalm 36:6). Did not our capacity fail in reaching the height of them, they would not have that intricacy and mystery by which they are characterized.

It is, however, to be observed, that the root of the malice was in the Egyptians themselves, so that the fault cannot be transferred to God. I say, they were spontaneously and innately wicked, and not forced by the instigation of another.

In regard to God, it ought to suffice us to know, that such was His will, although the reason may be unknown to us. But the reason is also apparent, which vindicates His righteousness from every objection. If we learn and keep in mind only this small word of advice, that the revealed will of God ought to be reverently acquiesced in, we will receive, without disputation, those mysteries which offend either the proud, or such as would be over-careful to remove the difficulties, in which, according to their view, such mysteries seem to be involved.

The prophet next expresses the manner in which the Egyptians worked mischief against the people of God: they did not assault them openly, that they might put them to death, but they endeavored, in the way of craft and policy, to oppress them by little and little. His expression is borrowed from Moses himself. And it is purposely used, that we may not think that the hearts of the ungodly are permitted without restraint to work our destruction. It is a consideration which ought surely to satisfy our minds, that whatever the devil and wicked men may plot against us, God nevertheless represses their attempts. But it is a double confirmation of our faith, when we hear that **not only their hands are bound, but also their hearts and thoughts, so that they can purpose nothing except what God pleases.**

26. *He sent Moses His servant.* Here the prophet briefly calls attention to such things regarding the deliverance of the people as were worthy of particular notice. Had the Egyptians of their own accord suffered the people to depart, neither the service of Moses nor miracles would have been required. God then appointed that their deliverance should take place in such a way, as would render the denial of His being its author impossible.

Moses was chosen by God.

Moses is called *the servant of the Lord*, to teach us that he was not self-elected to his office, and that he attempted nothing by his own authority, but, being the minister of God, executed the office with which he had been entrusted.

The same thing is expressed still more plainly with respect to Aaron, when he is said to *have been chosen*. What is attributed to each of these eminent men in particular, applies equally to both, and therefore the sentence ought to be explained thus: God sent Moses and Aaron, His servants, not because of their own intrinsic fitness, or because they spontaneously offered to Him their service, but because **He chose them**. This passage teaches us, that those who are engaged in active and useful service for the Church, are not prepared exclusively by their own exertions, or framed to it by their own talents, but are stirred up to it by God.

Moses was a man of heroic virtue: but, considered merely in himself, he was nothing. Accordingly, the prophet would have all that is accounted worthy of remembrance in Moses, as well as in Aaron, to be ascribed to God alone. Thus it appears that **whatever men do for the welfare of the Church, they owe the power of doing it to God, who, of His free goodness, has been pleased thus to honor them.**

Psalm 105:3 “Surely our God is in heaven; He has done whatever pleased Him.”

God's Decrees

When they place God in heaven, they do not confine Him to a certain locality, nor set limits to His infinite essence; but they deny the limitation of His power, its being shut up to human instrumentality only, or its being subject to fate or fortune. In short, they put the universe under His control; and, being superior to every obstruction, He does freely every thing that may seem good to Him. This truth is still more plainly asserted in the subsequent clause, He *has done whatever pleased Him*. **God, then, may be said to dwell in heaven, as the world is subject to His will, and nothing can prevent Him from accomplishing His purpose.**

That God can do whatever 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 meaning of God's doing whatever 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 designs. 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 premise 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 accustomed 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.**

Not a bare permission but an active decreeing.

From this passage 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 whatever 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 [foreknowledge], 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 every thing which takes place is done according to His will.

God is not the author (or authorizer) of evil.

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 (Isaiah 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 (Psalm 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 whatever 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 [greed], 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. Therefore, if He at any time appears to us to be asleep, or has not the means of succoring 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.

Summary from Psalm 107:33-41

God's providence is His "overruling purpose."

There is nothing more calculated to increase our faith, than the knowledge of the providence of God; because, without it, we would be harassed with doubts and fears, being uncertain whether or not the world was governed by chance.

For this reason, it follows that those who aim at the subversion of this doctrine, depriving the children of God of true comfort, and vexing their minds by unsettling their faith, forge

for themselves a hell upon earth. For what can be more awfully tormenting than to be constantly racked with doubt and anxiety? And we will never be able to arrive at a calm state of mind until we are taught to repose with implicit confidence in the providence of God.

All those who do not properly observe the providence of God will be found to be nothing but fools.