

Lesson 10: Questions 14 and 15

14-15

In our last questions we considered God's work of creation and the creation of man. We saw that the world is not self-made but God-made, spoken into being by His word, and declared "*very good*" ([Genesis 1:31](#)). We also saw that mankind is not an accident or an animal with religious feelings, but God's image bearer, created male and female with a real calling in the world ([Genesis 1:26-28](#); [Colossians 3:10](#); [Ephesians 4:24](#)). Today we take the next step: once God creates, what does He do with His world, and what special relation did He establish with man in the garden?

Question 14: What is providence?

Q. What are God's works of providence?

A. God's works of providence are His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions.

The word "providence" is not a mysterious religious label for coincidence. It is the Bible's way of describing God's active rule over the world He made. Remember Q11, "God executeth His decrees in the works of creation and providence."

- Creation answers the question, "Where did everything come from?"
- Providence answers the question, "What is God doing now?"

The catechism's answer is carefully packed: it speaks of God's character in providence (most holy, wise, powerful), it speaks of God's action in providence (preserving and governing), and it stretches providence to its full scope (all His creatures, and all their actions).

1. Providence is "most holy"

We often begin with the harder questions: suffering, injustice, apparent randomness. The catechism begins with God's holiness, because Scripture insists that God's rule is never morally compromised. "*The LORD is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works.*" ([Psalm 145:17](#)) Notice the comprehensiveness: not only some of His ways, but "*all his ways*". Not only some of His works, but "*all His works*". That does not mean every event is pleasant or that every human decision is pure. It means God is never stained by the evil He permits and overrules. His providence is holy even if mysterious.

This is one of the main pastoral uses of the doctrine. When you cannot trace God's hand, you can still trust God's heart. But we should be precise: we are not trusting a vague benevolence. We are trusting the Holy One. Providence does not mean God shrugs at sin, or that He makes peace with wickedness. It means He rules over it without sharing in it. He remains righteous in all His ways.

2. Providence is "wise"

If holiness guards God's character, wisdom guards God's purpose. Providence is not raw power without plan. "*This also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.*" ([Isaiah 28:29](#)) The verse is striking because it places God's wisdom in the realm of practical governance. God gives farmers skill and timing. He teaches them when to plow, when to sow, when to thresh. Isaiah's point is that ordinary life is saturated with God's wise ordering.

[Psalm 104](#) celebrates the same truth on a cosmic scale: "*O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all*" ([Psalm 104:24](#)). God's wisdom is not only seen in the creation of things, but in their sustained "fitting-ness": ecosystems, seasons, patterns of creaturely life, provision through ordinary means. The world holds together because the Creator is wise and continues to rule wisely.

Here is a challenge for our humility. We often think wisdom means we can explain everything. Scripture's definition is different. God's wisdom often surpasses our ability to comprehend it, but it never fails to be real. To humbly confess providence is not to claim you can decode every trial. It is to confess that God's counsel, not untethered chaos, is at the center of the universe ([Isaiah 28:29](#)).

3. Providence is “powerful”

Wisdom without power would be admirable but ineffective. Power without wisdom would be terrifying. God’s providence is both. **Hebrews 1:3** describes the Son as “*upholding the universe by the word of his power.*” That sentence should recalibrate how we picture the world. The universe is not a machine that God built and then left running on its own. It is upheld. Actively held up. Sustained. The continued existence of all things depends on the continuing will of God, expressed through the powerful word of the Son.

That means providence includes preservation. God preserves what He has made. Your next breath is not ultimately guaranteed by strong lungs or medical technology, but by the preserving hand of God. That fact is not meant to make us anxious, but humble and grateful. It also means that prayer is not an irrational interruption of the natural order. It is a creature speaking to the One Who upholds the natural order.

4. Providence “preserves and governs”

The catechism uses two verbs:

1. “Preserving” addresses continuation: God sustains and keeps.
2. “Governing” addresses direction: God rules and orders toward His ends.

Psalm 103:19 is a clear statement of government: “*The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.*” Providence is not limited to the spiritual realm. God’s kingdom rules over all. There is no square inch of reality that is outside His authority, no creature too small, no ruler too powerful, no event too mundane.

But Scripture also insists that God’s governing reaches into details that we are tempted to dismiss as trivial. Jesus says, “*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.*” (**Matthew 10:29**) Then He presses the point further: “*Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.*” (**Matthew 10:31**) In context, Jesus is preparing His disciples for opposition. He is not offering a sentimental thought. He is grounding courage in providence. If the Father governs the fall of a sparrow, then persecution is not outside His notice. If the Father counts even the hairs of your head, then your life is not at the mercy of blind forces.

This is also where we need to be careful and seminary-level in our thinking. God’s providence does not erase creaturely action. The catechism says He preserves and governs “all His creatures, and all their actions.” That includes human actions, angelic actions, and the entire chain of causes in the world, top to bottom, beginning to end. Yet Scripture also holds human responsibility intact. God governs without violating the nature of His creatures. He can rule through secondary causes without being reduced to them. He can direct history without turning humans into puppets.

One helpful way to say it is this: God is the first cause, and creatures are real secondary causes. When I speak, my mouth truly moves, my mind truly chooses, my will truly acts. Yet none of those realities escape God’s government. Providence is not God doing everything instead of creatures. Providence is God governing everything through creatures, above creatures, and sometimes in spite of creatures, while remaining holy, wise, and powerful.

Summary

- **First:** Providence teaches trust. If God’s kingdom rules over all (**Psalm 103:19**), then you are never at the mercy of luck. You may be surprised, but you are not abandoned.
- **Second:** Providence teaches sobriety. If God governs “all their actions”, your choices matter. You do not get to blame God for your sin. Providence never excuses disobedience.
- **Third:** Providence teaches worship. When you see the world as upheld by the word of His power (**Hebrews 1:3**), ordinary gratitude becomes theological. Food, health, friendships, and even the patience to endure hardship are not self generated. They are preserved gifts.

Question 15: What is the Covenant of Works?

- Q. What special act of providence did God exercise towards man in the estate wherein he was created?
- A. When God had created man, He entered into a covenant of life with him upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon pain of death.

This question narrows the lens. Providence is God's government of all things, but God's providence toward man in Eden had a particular form: covenant. The catechism calls it a "covenant of life". Many theologians also call it the Covenant of Works. The label matters less than the substance. The substance is that God related to Adam not only as Creator to creature, but as King to covenant partner. God gave a clear command, attached a clear promise of life, and warned of a clear penalty.

1. When God had created man, He entered into a covenant of life with him

Genesis 2 presents Eden as more than a beautiful habitat. It is a holy temple setting where God speaks to man, assigns work, provides abundance, and then gives a specific command with a sanction. The covenantal shape appears in the elements: a God-given stipulation, a threat of judgment, and by implication a promised blessing of life.

Genesis 2:17 states the prohibition and the penalty: "*but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.*" God is not vague. He does not say, "Try to be good." He gives a definite command, and He tells Adam exactly what disobedience will earn.

Why call this a covenant? Because Scripture later speaks of the principle at work: life is held out on the condition of obedience. Paul articulates the works principle plainly: "*the one who does them shall live by them.*" (**Galatians 3:12**) In context, Paul is contrasting law and faith as ways of justification. He is not saying the law is evil. He is saying the law, as a covenant principle, demands doing, and it offers life on that basis. That works principle is not invented at Sinai. It is rooted in creation, because Adam stood in a probationary arrangement: obey and live, disobey and die.

2. Upon condition of perfect obedience

The catechism is intentionally strict: perfect obedience. Not mostly. Not sincerely. Perfect. That is not harsh; it is simply the nature of God's holiness and the nature of moral law. God does not grade on a curve. To obey God is to obey Him entirely.

This exposes one of the deepest temptations of fallen religion: to think that God's standard is negotiable. We instinctively want to imagine that "good intentions" can substitute for obedience. But Eden teaches otherwise. The moment we picture God's command as flexible, we have already started to drift from the God Who is most holy (**Psalms 145:17**). The demand of perfect obedience is the necessary backdrop for understanding both sin and grace. Until we feel the weight of "perfect", we will not feel the wonder of Christ's righteousness.

3. Forbidding him to eat ... upon pain of death

Genesis 2:17 includes both prohibition and penalty. The tree was not poisonous. The act of eating was not biologically lethal. The death threatened is covenantal judgment: the judicial consequence of rebellion against God. "*You shall surely die*" means the wages of sin is death (**Romans 6:23**), because sin is treason against the Creator King.

Notice also the mercy hidden within the command. God's prohibition is narrow. The permission is wide. Adam may eat of every other tree. God gives abundance and then places one boundary. The command is not a trap. It is a test of trust and allegiance. Will man live as a creature under God's word, or will he grasp at autonomy?

And this sets up the whole storyline of Scripture. Adam's failure will not merely be personal. He is the head of the human race. His obedience or disobedience has public, even universal, consequences. That is why the covenant is so important. If you do not see Adam as standing in a covenantal arrangement with real stakes, you will struggle to understand why Christ's obedience matters so much. The gospel is not only that Christ dies for sinners. It is also that He obeys for sinners. Where Adam broke covenant, Christ fulfills it. Where the first man's one act of transgression curses the entire human race, the last Adam's one act of righteousness heals and restores and reconciles all who are in Him.

Summary

- **First:** Question 15 teaches the seriousness of sin. Sin is not primarily a psychological mistake or a social misstep. It is the violation of God's covenant word, worthy of death (**Genesis 2:17**).
- **Second:** It teaches the clarity of God's revelation. Adam was not confused. God spoke plainly. We cannot excuse ourselves by blaming God for obscurity.
- **Third:** It teaches the blessedness of grace. If life was originally held out on the condition of perfect obedience, and if Adam failed, then we need a Savior Who can provide what we cannot. **Galatians 3:12** presses the works principle into our conscience so that we stop pretending and start looking to Christ.

Conclusion

Put Questions 14 and 15 together and you begin to see the catechism's genius. God is not only the Creator; He is the Governor. His throne is established, His kingdom rules over all (**Psalms 103:19**), and even sparrows do not fall apart from the Father's will (**Matthew 10:29**). That should make us steady. The world is not godless and your life is not meaningless. The universe is upheld by the word of His power (**Hebrews 1:3**), and He is righteous in all His ways (**Psalms 145:17**).

But providence is not abstract. In Eden, God's providence toward man took the shape of covenant. He gave a command, attached the condition of perfect obedience, and warned of death for disobedience (**Genesis 2:17**). Paul later states the principle without apology: "*the one who does them shall live by them.*" (**Galatians 3:12**) That is not the gospel, but it is the necessary backdrop for the gospel. It tells us what God's holiness requires and what we cannot produce in ourselves.

As you go into this week, I would encourage you to respond in two ways:

1. **Believe** that your life is governed by a holy, wise, and powerful Father. If His kingdom rules over all, and not even a sparrow falls apart from your Father, then your life is not ruled by luck, chaos, or blind forces. Bring your anxieties, confusions, and sorrows to Him, and ask for grace to trust His providence even when you cannot trace it.
2. **Live** before Him with humility and obedience. Eden reminds us that God is not only kind but holy, and that His creatures are not free to define good and evil for themselves. Examine one area of your life this week where you are tempted to lean on self-will, excuse disobedience, or negotiate with God's commands, and ask Him to make you honest, submissive, and quick to repent.

These truths prepare us for what comes next in the catechism: how man fell, what misery came by sin, and why we need a Redeemer Who not only dies, but obeys, in the place of His people.