

John Calvin on God's omnipotence, decrees and providence

[From pages 231 to 235 of his *Institutes* - Beveridge Translation (1800)].
[Old English updated; words referring to God are capitalized. Bible references are in 3 digit form – aal]

3. And truly God claims omnipotence to Himself, and would have us to acknowledge it, — not the vain, indolent, slumbering omnipotence which sophists invent, but vigilant, efficacious, energetic, and ever active, — not an omnipotence which may only act as a general principle of confused motion, as in ordering a stream to keep within the channel once prescribed to it, but one which is intent on individual and special movements. God is deemed omnipotent, not because He can act though He may cease or be idle, or because by a general instinct He continues the order of nature previously appointed; **BUT because, governing Heaven and Earth by His providence, He so overrules all things that nothing happens without His counsel.** For when it is said in the Psalms, *He has done whatever He has pleased*, [PSA 115:3], the thing meant is His sure and deliberate purpose. It were dull to interpret the Psalmist's words in philosophic fashion, to mean that God is the primary agent, because the beginning and cause of all motion. **This rather is the solace of the faithful, in their adversity, that every thing which they endure is by the ordination and command of God, THAT THEY ARE UNDER HIS HAND.** But if the government of God thus extends to all His works, it is a childish objection to confine it to natural influx. Those moreover who confine the providence of God within narrow limits, as if He allowed all things to be born along freely according to a perpetual law of nature, do not more defraud God of His glory than themselves of a most useful doctrine; for nothing were more wretched than man if he were exposed to all possible movements of the sky, the air, the Earth, and the water. We may add, that by this view the singular goodness of God towards each individual is unbecomingly impaired. David exclaims, [PSA 8:3], that infants hanging at their mothers breasts are eloquent enough to celebrate the glory of God, because, from the very moment of their births they find an food prepared for them by heavenly care. Indeed, if we do not shut our eyes and senses to the fact, we must see that some mothers have full provision for their infants, and others almost none, according as it is the pleasure of God to nourish one child more liberally, and another more sparingly. Those who attribute due praise to the omnipotence of God thereby derive a double benefit. **He to whom Heaven and Earth belong, and whose nod all creatures must obey, is fully able to reward the honor which they pay to Him, and they can rest secure in the protection of Him to whose control everything that could do**

them harm is subject, by whose authority, Satan, with all his wild rage and devices, is curbed as with a bridle, and on whose will everything adverse to our safety depends. In this way, and in no other, can the immoderate and superstitious fears, excited by the dangers to which we are exposed, be calmed or subdued. I say superstitious fears. For such they are, as often as the dangers threatened by any created objects inspire us with such terror, that we tremble as if they had in themselves a power to hurt us, or could hurt at random or by chance; or as if we had not in God a sufficient protection against them. For example, Jeremiah forbids the children of God *to be dismayed at the signs of heaven, as the heathen are dismayed at them*, [JER 10:2]. He does not, indeed, condemn every kind of fear. But as unbelievers transfer the government of the world from God to the stars, imagining that happiness or misery depends on their decrees or predictions, and not on the Divine will, the consequence is, that their fear, which ought to have reference to Him only, is diverted to stars and comets. **Let him, therefore, who would beware of such unbelief, always bear in mind, that there is no random power, or agency, or motion in the creatures, who are so governed by the secret counsel of God, that nothing happens but what He has knowingly and willingly decreed.**

4. First, then, let the reader remember that the providence we mean is not one by which the Deity, sitting idly in heaven, looks on at what is taking place in the world, **but one by which He, as it were, holds the steering wheel and overrules all events.** Hence His providence extends not less to the hand than to the eye. When Abraham said to his son, *God will provide*, [GEN 22:8], he meant not merely to assert that the future event was foreknown to God but to resign the management of an unknown business to the will of Him whose province it is to bring perplexed and doubtful matters to a happy result. Hence it appears that providence consists in action. What many talk of bare prescience is the merest trifling. Those do not err quite so grossly who attribute government to God, but still, as I have observed, a confused and promiscuous government which consists in giving an impulse and general movement to the machine of the globe and each of its parts, but does not specially direct the action of every creature. **It is impossible, however, to tolerate this error.** For, according to its promoters, there is nothing in this providence, which they call universal, to prevent all the creatures from being moved contingently, or to prevent man from turning himself in this direction or in that, according to the mere freedom of his own will. In this way they make man a partner with God, — God, by His energy,

impressing man with the movement by which he can act, agreeably to the nature conferred upon him while man voluntarily regulates his own actions. In short, **their doctrine is, that the world, the affairs of men, and men themselves, are governed by the power, but not by the decree of God.** I say nothing of the Epicureans, (a pest with which the world has always been plagued,) who dream of an inert and idle God, and others, not a whit sounder, who of old pretended that God rules the upper regions of the air, but leaves the inferior to Fortune. Against such evident madness even dumb creatures lift their voice.

My intention now is, to refute an opinion which has very generally obtained — an opinion which, while it concedes to God some blind and equivocal movement, withholds what is of principal importance, viz., the disposing and directing of every thing to its proper end by incomprehensible wisdom. By withholding government, it makes God the ruler of the world in name only, not in reality. For what, I ask, is meant by government, if it be not to preside so as to regulate the destiny of that over which you preside? I do not, however, totally repudiate what is said of a universal providence, provided, on the other hand, it is conceded to me that the world is governed by God, not only because He maintains the order of nature appointed by Him, but because He takes a special charge of every one of His works. It is true, indeed, that each species of created objects is moved by a secret instinct of nature, as if they obeyed the eternal command of God, and spontaneously followed the course which God at first appointed. And to this we may refer our Savior's words, that he and his Father have always been at work from the beginning, [JOH 5:17]; also the words of Paul, that *in him we live, and move, and have our being*, [ACT 17:28]; also the words of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who, when wishing to prove the divinity of Christ, says, that He upholds *all things by the word of his power*, [HEB 1:3]. But some, under pretext of the general, hide and obscure the special providence, which is so surely and clearly taught in Scripture, that it is strange how any one can bring himself to doubt of it. And, indeed, those who interpose that disguise are themselves forced to modify their doctrine, by adding that many things are done by the special care of God. This, however, they erroneously confine to particular acts. **The thing to be proved, therefore, is, that single events are so regulated by God, AND ALL EVENTS SO PROCEED FROM HIS DETERMINATE COUNSEL, THAT NOTHING HAPPENS BY CHANCE.**

5. Assuming that the beginning of motion belongs to God, but that all things move spontaneously or casually, according to the impulse which nature gives, the change by the laws of nature of day and night, summer and winter, will be the work of God; inasmuch as He, in assigning the office of each, appointed a certain law, namely, that they should always with uniform tenor observe the same course, day succeeding night, month succeeding month, and year succeeding year. But, as at one time, excessive heat, combined with drought, burns up the fields; at another time excessive rains rot the crops, while sudden devastation is produced by tempests and storms of hail, these will not be the works of God, unless in so far as rainy or fair weather, heat or cold, are produced by the coming together of the stars, and other natural causes. According to this view, there is no place left either for the paternal favor, or the judgments of God. If it is said that God fully manifests His kindness to the human race, by furnishing Heaven and Earth with the ordinary power of producing food, the explanation is meager and heathenish: as if the fertility of one year were not a special blessing, the poverty and famine of another a special punishment and curse from God. But as it would occupy too much time to enumerate all the arguments, let the authority of God Himself suffice. In the Law and the Prophets he repeatedly declares, that as often as He waters the Earth with dew and rain, He manifests His favor, that by His command the Heaven becomes hard as iron, the crops are destroyed by mildew and other evils, that storms and hail, in devastating the fields, are signs of sure and special vengeance. **This being admitted, IT IS CERTAIN THAT NOT A DROP OF RAIN FALLS WITHOUT THE EXPRESS COMMAND OF GOD.**

David, indeed, [PSA 146:9], extols the general providence of God in supplying food to the young ravens that cry to him but when God Himself threatens living creatures with famine, does He not plainly declare that they are all nourished by Him, at one time with scanty, at another with more ample measure? **It is childish, as I have already said, to confine this to particular acts, when Christ says, without reservation, THAT NOT A SPARROW FALLS TO THE GROUND WITHOUT THE WILL OF HIS FATHER,** [MAT 10:29]. **Surely, if the flight of birds is regulated by the counsel of God, we must acknowledge with the prophet, that while He dwells on high, He humbles Himself to behold the things that are in Heaven and in the Earth,** [PSA 113:5, 6].

