

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 10¹

Rev. Dr. R. D. Anderson (last modified 17-03-1015)

Liturgy (old Book of Praise)

votum / salutation

Hymn 48:1, 2

Confession of Faith: Hymn 1a

Prayer

Diaconal Collection

Psalm 113:3

Reading of Scripture: Gen. 37:2b-11; 18-24

Psalm 31:6, 7 (standing)

Reading of Scripture: Gen. 37:25-36

Psalm 27:4, 5, 6 (stand for vs. 4, 5)

Reading of Belgic Conf.: art. 13

Lord's Day 10

Sermon

Psalm 31:14, 15 (stand for v.14)

Announcements (prayer points)

Pastoral Prayer

Hymn 48:3, 4

Benediction

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Lords Day 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism follows directly on, obviously, from LD 9 and both of them concern our confession of God the Father and creation. In particular LD 10 is concerned not so much with the fact that God has created the world, but with the fact that He still upholds that creation. His work of upholding that creation is in itself a wonderful act of grace because, let's face it, if God had given all vent to His righteous wrath this creation would have been wrapped up long ago, immediately after our forefathers Adam and Eve fell into sin. But no: He upholds it! And the way He upholds it we describe by that word 'providence'.

So I preach to you this afternoon:

"God's providence motivating our lives"

1) We'll first of all first see what 'providence' is

2) And secondly we'll see that concept illustrated in the life of Joseph

1) What 'providence' is

When you just look at that word it *can* sound pretty abstract and to many people it comes across as a difficult concept. It seems dry, impossible to understand, that God has foreordained all things, that He directs all things and yet, as we've read in the Belgic Confession, you can't blame Him for the bad things that happen in the world, for sin and evil. As such it seems to be a concept not only difficult to understand but also without comfort or practical value.

Well ... let me be blunt: *If* that is your view then I'd argue that you've never understood it ... because: *rightly* understood the doctrine of God's providence, that He upholds His creation, is indeed very practical for our daily walk with God and it gives us a great comfort!

But what does that word mean? Let's start there. 'Providence' is, of course, an English form of the Latin word 'Providentia', coming from the verb 'provideo'. A few of you know Latin, maybe you can already work out what it's supposed to mean. It's a verb, 'provideo', that means: "to look or see ahead". But the tricky bit is: how to put that into practice. You see, it doesn't mean 'looking ahead' in the sense of: 'seeing history in advance and reacting to that'. That's what some people think providence is all about: God looks into the future, He sees and thinks: "Oh, ... that and that is going to happen and, actually, I want to change

¹ Thanks to Rolf Koens for transcribing this sermon from the recording.

that and we'll bring this into play and that into play and we'll see if we can't change the future" ... that's not what it means!

But there's a really easy way to tell what it means. Because what it's actually about is: looking ahead, planning and caring for the future. And that's where we get the word 'to *provide*'. You all know what that means, that's an easy word right? You provide for your family, you provide for others, you can provide for many things, well: that's exactly what provide-nce is, providing. God provides for His people, by His Fatherly hand. You see that in Q&A 27:

"God's providence is His almighty, ever present power whereby He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures and so governs them that nothing comes by chance but by His fatherly hand"

...He is providing.

You can see that also in what we confessed last week in LD 9: "I trust in Him completely, so completely as to have no doubt that He will PROVIDE me with all things necessary for body and soul." That is that 'provision', that 'providing' that leads straight on to LD 10.

Provide-nce...: providing.

Believing, you see, the doctrine of God's providence is believing that God truly is your heavenly Father: on the one hand: Almighty, able to do anything, on the other hand: using that power as a father for his children. So let's see then, brothers and sisters, how that's illustrated in the life of Joseph

2) The concept illustrated in the life of Joseph

We read from Genesis 37, about the younger years of Joseph. We see him there as a 17 year old lad, not very wise, let's be honest ... He's the youngest in a large family, sure enough: he's got one brother under him, Benjamin, who was probably already born by that time but who would only be about 1 or 2 years old and therefore, in that society, not 'counted' yet. Of those who are of an age who can think and act Joseph is the youngest. But Joseph, you see, has a different mum from all the other brothers, his mum is Rachel.

Joseph, as the youngest, goes out to visit his brothers as they're shepherding the flocks of his father, but he comes back and he brings nasty reports about them. And that's underlined in the Hebrew: not just a bad report that might have been true, no: he's bringing genuinely nasty reports against his brothers, brothers from another mother ... And that does not ingratiate him to his brothers, it is also not a very 'Christian' thing to do ... is it?

Well: this not very wise 17 year old is also not helped by his own father. You see: he's got a father who plays favorites, and his favorite son is Joseph. And father Jacob makes that very obvious: by giving him special gifts. We're told for example of that multi-coloured coat that he gives to Joseph and we're told that Jacob does not hide his special attention to Joseph from the other sons, no: he makes it obvious!

And you get what happens: the other sons begin to hate Joseph, not only does their father love him more than them but he makes himself obnoxious: spreading bad reports about them: no wonder his brothers were jealous!

Alright: Let's stand back a bit. Where's God's hand in that description of Jacob's family in Genesis 37? If you read it and if you think about it, it seems rather all too human, does it not? We can see a family, yes: a believing family, but a family with many sins, weaknesses and shortcomings. Well: in this situation then, what does the Lord do? We're told what he does: he sends to that 17 year old Joseph a vision, a dream, not just any dream that you'd dream at night, a dream which is obviously a revelation from God. Now think about that: That's what God does: He sends Joseph a dream. Is God HELPING that situation? Is God helping that proud young 17 year old whipper-snapper like Joseph to become a better believer? To get some humility?

The dream tells Joseph that he's going to rule over his brothers. Well naturally the boy can't withstand the temptation to boast ... and that's exactly what he does ... only making himself MORE hated by his brothers.

So does the Lord NOW step in and help Joseph become a more humble and more loving son? No ... God gives Joseph another dream, even stronger than the first one: the sun and the moon and the eleven stars will bow down to him, in other words: dad and mum and eleven brothers. And he tells that dream – boasts about that as well – to his brothers and then also to his father. Well, this time even for his father that becomes a bit much: THEY will bow down before HIM?

Now don't get me wrong brothers and sisters: it is the intention of the Lord God to bring Joseph further in faith. But there are also other things in the background that the Lord God is working with here as we shall see. For Joseph this going to be a long and difficult road to faith and trust in the Lord. And first he must learn by going through, as it were, the valley of darkness. For Joseph makes himself so hated by his brothers that he comes just once too often to visit them. They hatch a plan and, although they first want to kill him, Reuben persuades them to throw him in a pit before they do that.

So they throw him in a pit. And what happens: Ishmaelites come along, traders. So they decide to sell their brother ... to them.

Now think about all this from the perspective of Joseph himself: Joseph will NOT have understood that God holds all the strings of his life in His Fatherly hand. What would Joseph have seen? His older brothers from a different mum, they've not only thrown him in a pit but sold him off as a slave! They'd gotten rid of him! They wanted to kill him! But you see: the Lord wants Joseph in Egypt. And in that respect the appearance of those Ishmaelite traders was no coincidence: the Lord PROVIDED the means to spare Joseph's life. His brothers wanted to kill him remember – even though they put him in a pit at Reuben's direction? But then all of a sudden come these traders. Not that they see that as something coming from God's hands, no, but these traders stimulate in themselves the lust for money; we can SELL him! Have some money and at the same time be rid of that cheeky kid... And that's exactly what they do. While God is directing the affairs of history they themselves are just reacting to their own lusts, as God full well knows when He sends those traders along that route at that exact time.

Now what about Joseph? He ends up in Egypt. Sold as a slave to a courtier: Potiphar. Now you would think that there would be a big temptation for Joseph to think that his God, not just his brothers, but his God had abandoned him. He has after all been wrenched out of the covenant family. He no longer, as it were, is connected to or belongs to the descendants Abraham, Isaac and father Jacob. He's become a sort of Ishmael: sent away, excommunicated. And he would have every reason to think that he means nothing anymore to God and that God therefore means nothing to him: he would have EVERY reason to be depressed ... would he not? But what do we see? The Lord grants faith to Joseph! That faith he needs all the way in Egypt, by himself, to trust and to keep trusting in Him. And also in the further history of Joseph in Egypt we see the providence of God.

Imagine it had been yourself: Chucked out by your own family, sold off as a slave somewhere else in a different country ... what would you have thought? You see: Joseph didn't know how it would all turn out, what the end of it will be. The only thing he knows is that he's now a slave in Egypt. And he's probably thinking: "that's what I'm going to be, for the rest of my life!" He only saw the misery of the moment. But what did he do? Have a look at chapter 39 of Genesis. We'll read from verse 2. (Read it till vs. 4)

2 The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. 3 And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand. 4 So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority.

Well excuse me brothers and sisters: ... how did Potiphar know that it was Yahweh blessing Joseph in all his faithful service to Potiphar? The only possible explanation, the only way that Potiphar COULD have known is that Joseph also tells his master about the God he serves. There is no other explanation. Joseph recognises the hand of the Lord in his life and he witnesses about that. Despite everything that's happened the Lord Yahweh is still his God. And it seems to go well then for a while, 'well', as you can readily understand, between inverted comma's: it may go well in Potiphar's house but he's still not home, he will miss his father and his mother, he is not with the covenant people, he has no freedom and he has no clue as to what God wants with his life. But does that fact bring him to great doubts in his faith? No: for he is learning to trust

God's Fatherly hand, God's providence ... even when HE can't see the future: HE doesn't know what God has in store, he trusts that God is still in control, even in Egypt: caring for him; God knows best. And even in those circumstances he can bear witness to God: follow God's commandments in thankfulness for even HERE the Lord is blessing him.

But as you well know: that faith is soon put to the test: For Potiphar's wife has designs upon Joseph. Joseph will have nothing of it: he wants to remain righteous, also in his own sexuality ... despite the temptation, he flees, he runs. But Potiphar's wife is devious and by false accusation he ends up in jail. You all know the story. You've all seen, I think, the cells in Fremantle prison: a little tiny cell with a bucket at the end as a piss-pot. Well: cells in the dungeon – because that's what it was! – in Egypt would have even been worse! Faith is put to the test. But even there the Lord is still with Joseph! And blesses him! And even here Joseph finds opportunity to witness for the Lord: have a look again at Genesis 39: 21:

the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy and he gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison

You see: trusting in the Lord no matter what happens in our lives prevents bitterness. God's Father-hand brings gifts, both good and sometimes bad in life and we need to trust in His leading. A part of that trust is the conviction that God's love is always there behind the way He is leading and directing our lives. Now Joseph witnesses in prison not only in words but also in deeds: look at his relationship with those other fellows who land up in prison with him: the baker and the cup-bearer of the Pharaoh: Joseph cares for them as people. He doesn't just ignore them: "oh, a couple of other prisoners: what have they got to do with me?" No: he cares for them as people. He asks after them when they're obviously dejected, that's exactly what's going on in chapter 40, verse 6:

Joseph came into them in the morning and looked at them and saw that they were sad so he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in the custody of his lord's house saying: 'why do you look so sad today?' They say to him: 'we've each had a dream, there's no interpreter of it'. So Joseph said to them: 'do not interpretations belong to God?, tell them to me please'

How can that statement mean anything at all unless Joseph has already been telling the baker and the cup-bearer about God? But don't forget that when Joseph hears that these two fellows have had dreams that Joseph too would have been very much aware that long ago, as a young lad of 17 HE had received dreams, dreams that actually became the cause of much misery in his own life, dreams that, to his knowledge, had never come true. Dreams that were, for him at that time, ancient history. Nevertheless he desires to help these men. And in interpreting the dream of the cup-bearer he's able to tell the cup-bearer that in 3 days he'll be set free and restored in the service of the Pharaoh and he asks of that cup-bearer: "remember me when you become before the Pharaoh".

Joseph is now 28 years old. Maybe now is his chance, maybe now the Lord will let him go free. Well: read chapter 40:14:

but remember me, says Joseph, when it is well with you and please show kindness to me, make mention of me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house for indeed I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews and also I've done nothing here that they should put me into the dungeon.

Try to imagine what it must have been like in the coming days for Joseph: suspense: will the cup-bearer say something to Pharaoh. But the days become weeks and the weeks become months and the months become years... Have a look at verse 23:

yet the chief butler did NOT remember Joseph but forgot him

Only after 2 full years, when Pharaoh has a dream does the cup-bearer remember and Joseph is summoned from the dungeon before Pharaoh, chapter 41:15:

Pharaoh said to Joseph: 'I have had a dream and there's no one who can interpret it but I've heard it said of you that you can understand a dream, to interpret it'. So Joseph answered Pharaoh saying: "it is not in me, God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace'

Think about that statement of Joseph. Do you see how through the years he's changed? He has become a humble person. Not anything like that cocky 17 year old. "Interpretations belong to the Lord". Joseph, you see, has learned, in the words of our confession, to be 'patient in adversity'. He understands something of the confession of God's providence. And for him, in Egypt, a new period of blessing now begins: he will rule over Egypt. And he's enabled from the Pharaoh to be married, he begets sons. And we also see that he's learned to be thankful in prosperity: have a look at chapter 41:50:

to Joseph were born 2 sons before the years of famine came, whom Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On, bore of him. Joseph called the name of the first born Manasseh" ..Hebrew names..not Egyptian "for God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house" in other words: God has blessed me here.."and the name of the second he called Ephraim for God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction

Thankful in prosperity!

Now let's take a pause brothers and sisters and ask a different question: What was actually the basis for this trust in God that Joseph had? How did he know about God's Fatherly love? Well: as a son of Jacob he of course knew the history of Abraham: he knew that Abraham had been called out from a strange land and from a strange city where other gods had been worshipped and that God had brought Abraham to Canaan. And that God had given Abraham great promises of descendants, of inheriting the land, that God had even appeared to Abraham personally, remember? – in the column of fire when Abraham had laid out those animals, those dead animals and made as it were a path of blood. His great-grandfather...God had appeared to him! This God was the God of promises. But remember too that these promises were nearly all unfulfilled at the time of Joseph: no-one had inherited the land of Canaan and still the family of Jacob was a reasonably small collection, nothing like the 'sand on the seashore' or 'the stars in the heavens', and Joseph himself had never seen an angel, let alone an appearance of God Almighty.

But if Joseph then, on the basis of what he knew about God's workings with his forefathers, if he could bring together this trust in God...how much richer are we brothers and sisters, if WE reflect on God's providence! For we live in a time that we can reflect on the fact that many of the promises of God HAVE been fulfilled, and we can see in history how God works and the greatest of all we can see His giving up of His only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, on the cross, to be OUR Saviour, to take upon Himself OUR sins: we can understand the complete forgiveness of all our sins...not just as a promise, but as a fact: definitively shown on the cross and demonstrated again in the resurrection unto life before the face of so many eye-witnesses.

We know and confess that Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven where He is both our King AND our Highpriest, even today! How much *more* reason do we have NOT to get depressed when bad things happen in this life but to place our trust in God...and whatever happens: to remain faithful to Him, knowing that He IS in control and that HE has a plan even though we cannot see it ..and Joseph certainly couldn't see God's plan!

Only right at the end of his life does Joseph get to see something of the purpose of the events that had taken place, right at the VERY end. For even when his brothers come to Egypt during the famine Joseph still doesn't see God's plan in that; remember: when he hears about the existence of Benjamin, having survived infancy, how his plan there is to extract Benjamin out of that 'wasps-nest' of his own brothers, to keep him for himself.

And Joseph does that: he's not made of stone: he concocts a trick to get Benjamin on his side ... for trust in God does not expunge our own emotions: just have a look at Genesis 43:29:

then Joseph lifted his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mothers' son and said: is this your younger brother of whom you spoke to me? And he said: 'God be gracious to you my son. Now his

heart yearned for his brother, so Joseph made haste and sought somewhere to weep and he went into his chamber and wept there ...

And it's only much later that he realises what God's plan is: you see that in Chapter 45:4:

and Joseph said to his brothers: 'please come near to me '. So they came near. Then he said: 'I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.

And God Himself reveals His plan at this time, also to father Jacob, chapter 46:1:

So Israel took his journey with all that he had and came to Beersheba and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. Then God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night and said: 'Jacob, Jacob! And he said: 'here I am'. So He said: 'I am God, the God of your Father, do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt and I will also surely bring you up again and Joseph will put his hands on your eyes.

Jacob and his whole family goes to Egypt to survive the famine, God has prepared the way there, and they will be taken care of in Egypt, they will grow and they will become numerous, it will not be the end of the testing of their faith by a long shot...but God is showing something of the way HE works and His plan.

You know: after Jacob dies in Egypt the half-brothers of Joseph became once again very scared of him. For Joseph is still the great ruler of the land, underneath the Pharaoh. They now live in Egypt...and maybe... maybe Joseph was only kind to them because of dad, Jacob, who was still alive but now that he's dead... might he not turn around and punish them..? So what do the brothers do? They too have been led by God to this point: they front up to Joseph..and confess their sins to him. And now we see that Joseph has finally really understood God's providence; chapter 50:19:

Joseph said to them: 'do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you: you meant evil against me..but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day to save many people alive. Now therefore do not be afraid, I will provide for you and your little ones.' And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

That forgiveness is really ONLY something that can be placed in your heart by God's Spirit ... forgiving others as God has forgiven us EVEN when they left you for dead and sold you as a slave into a foreign land.

See here the trust in God's providence!

You see: God wants to see this confession of His fatherly hand in our lives worked out in practice. You've seen it this afternoon in Joseph's life ... but God is equally working with each and everyone of us... with His plan so that we may serve Him in the situation that He maps out for our lives. He gives us the strength, but He also asks us, brothers and sisters, for faith and trust in His leading. And that does not always explain particular things that are sent into our lives, no, it asks for faith. And at the end of our lives' course, when we are taken up into glory we MAY be allowed to see something of His plan for this world and for His Kingdom.

But in the meantime we don't waste time complaining and feeling frustrated and depressed. But we need to learn to use the opportunities that God gives us to serve Him in thankfulness, to witness of Him EVEN while we are being patient in adversity. Just as with Joseph God will NEVER abandon us, He has sealed His promise to us with the blood of His own Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. And with faith in Him we KNOW that He is always near us and we're able to confess and to pray: 'Lord ... THY will be done.

Amen