Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

It used to be that when it rained, people thought that God was crying. And lightning and thunder and earthquakes and volcanos meant that God was angry. Well, we now know that rain is precipitation; that rain falls to earth when clouds become saturated with water droplets to the point that they are too heavy to continue floating in the cloud, and down they come. And we also know about electricity in the sky and plate tectonics and magma flows, etc. So, we have become experts about many things that former generations just viewed as the activity of God. And education is a good thing. It is good to study economics or the weather or disease. But one of the downsides of this increased knowledge has been a tendency to ignore or deny the activity or even the existence of God.

And so, for example, back in 1940, as World War II began, the British army was outmanoeuvred and surrounded in France and facing possible annihilation at the hands of Nazi forces. And so, King George VI called on the government and the people of Great Britain and the Commonwealth and the Empire to gather for prayer. And this happened on Sunday, May 26th. And there are pictures of the King and members of the Cabinet, together with millions of people, all over the world, gathered in Cathedrals and Churches to pray. Why? Because it was believed that God could act to prevent defeat and bring about victory. But what happened in Covid? We were told to stay home and get vaccinated. There was no mention of prayer. Science would save us.

And the difference between these two approaches comes down to the topic before us today, which is the doctrine of providence. And we will see why this is in a moment, but before we do that, this topic is not just about global catastrophes. It is about *everything* in life. At the moment, the **leaves** of the oak trees outside are falling to the ground. Is that *just* gravity and the changing seasons and the reproductive processes of a tree? Or is each leaf supervised or governed or directed by God? And our **hearts** beat at about 80 beats per minute. So, that means they have beaten about 2400 times since the service began. Is that just biology? Or is each heartbeat of each person under the sovereign control of God? And I hope you can see that the answers to these questions have massive implications for us all.

So, our aim today is to see the **comfort in knowing that all things come to us from the hand of our Father in heaven**. And we want to see this as we consider our text in Acts 17. And our two points will simply be the **meaning** of providence and the **comfort** of providence.

1. So, first of all, the **Meaning** of Providence.
   1. Our focus last week was God as our Father in heaven. And we saw that God “created heaven and earth and everything in them … [and] still upholds and rules them by His eternal counsel and providence.” Well, we do not find the word **providence** in the Bible. It comes from Latin. ‘Pro’ means ‘before’ and ‘video’ (or more accurately ‘wideo’) means ‘to see.’ So, Providence is literally about God’s ability ‘to see beforehand.’ But as we see in our text, not only does He see or know all things before they happen, He sovereignly controls all things that happen.
   2. And this is what we see in Acts 17. Paul was preaching to the philosophers in Athens. And the common view of that time was that there were many gods. But look how Paul began his address: “**The** **God**.” Not “there is A god who I’d like to talk about today,” or “I want to tell you about my God,” no, he says, “the God.” What a bold declaration of Paul! And why was he so bold? What gave him the right to make this claim? Because it is the truth. In the Scriptures, which are where this God has revealed Himself, He is God and God alone. **Deuteronomy 4:35**, “*The Lord is God, besides Him there is no other*.” **Isaiah 45:22**, “*I am God, and there is no other*.” So, right at the get go, Paul proclaimed the one true God.
   3. But then he continued, “*The God who made the world and everything in it, being the Lord of heaven and earth*.” So, here Paul was speaking about God as Almighty Creator of heaven and earth, but also as the **Lord** of creation. For Lord means master, owner, ruler, king, etc. And Paul spoke about this further by saying that God “*does not live in temples made by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything*.”
      1. The common view of the gods in Greek society was that the gods did live in temples built by humans. And they needed food and sacrifices and sexual activity to keep them happy.
      2. Now, perhaps you are wondering, didn’t God come down to live in the Temple in the Old Testament? And didn’t He demand sacrifices from the people? And they are good questions! But even though there was the glory cloud of the presence of God that filled the most holy place in the temple, when **Solomon** built the temple, in his prayer of dedication, he said, “*But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!*” So, Solomon understood that God did not *really* live in the temple. And in terms of God needing the sacrifices that were presented, this is what God said in **Psalm 50**, “*I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills*.” So, the temple and the sacrifices of the Old Testament were not because God needed them but as an ongoing and visible sign for the people of God’s grace and presence.
      3. But the key point here is that rather than needing anything from us, “*God gives to all mankind life and breath and everything*.” As this is why our Lord’s Day says, “Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which He upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that ... all things … come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand.”
         1. Now, to put a little flesh on these bones, so to speak, here is a list of examples of the providence of God from the Bible (and I have adapted this from a commentary):
            1. The **nations** are under God's control. We see this in Psalm 2 and Psalm 33:10 and it is a key theme of the Book of Daniel, for example.
            2. He also controls what we call ‘**nature**.’ Think of Jesus rebuking the wind to calm the stormy sea. Psalm 135:7 says, “[The Lord] *makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from His storehouses*.”
            3. He also controls **animals**. In 2 Kings 17:25, we read, “Therefore the LORD sent lions among them, which killed some of them.” And of course, in Daniel 6, God shut the mouths of lions so that they would not eat Daniel. In Jonah 4, God appointed a fish to swallow Jonah and a worm to attack the plant that was giving shade to Jonah so that it withered. And in Matthew 10:29, Jesus said that not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of the Father.
            4. He is also sovereign over **Satan and evil spirits**. We see this with the accounts of Jesus driving demons out of people and even into pigs! We see it also in 1 Samuel in the times when the Lord sent an evil; spirit to afflict King Saul.
            5. He also uses **wicked people** for His plans-not just in a "bringing good out of evil" sort of way but in an active, intentional, "this was God's plan from the get-go" sort of way. Think of the account of Job and how Satan’s activity served God’s greater purpose. Jesus also told Pilate that his authority to crucify Him was given from above.
            6. And God **hardens hearts**, as we are told in Romans 9:18 in relation to Pharoah refusing to let the people of Israel go.
            7. And God sends **trouble and calamity**. Amos 3:6 says, “*Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?*” Isaiah 45:7 says, “*I am the LORD … I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things*.” And we often read in the Bible of the Lord having closed the womb of women, like Sarah and Hannah, for example. And it was the Angel of the Lord who slaughtered the firstborn of the Egyptians, and it was God who struck down many of the people of Israel with a plague after yet another of their complaints.
            8. And God even **puts to death.** 1 Samuel 2:6 says, “*The LORD kills and brings to life; He brings down to Sheol and raises up*.” And after David’s sin with Bethsheba, we are told that “the LORD afflicted the child that [Bethsheba] bore to David, and he became sick,” and eventually died.
            9. In **Isaiah 46:9-10**, God says, “*I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'*” And after **Nebuchadnezzar** had recovered from his insanity, we read, “*I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored Him who lives forever, for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and He does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand or say to Him, "What have you done?"”* So, God does what He pleases and His purposes cannot be thwarted. In short, the Scriptures are clear that God guides *all* our steps and works *all* things after the counsel of His will. This is what providence means.
   4. Now, in a moment we are going to speak about the comfort of providence. But perhaps you have heard everything thus far, and you are thinking to yourself, **none of this sounds comforting**. All I have heard so far is about absolute power and total control. Well, this is why we must briefly consider the rest of Paul’s sermon and the response to it before we continue. For from verse 26 on, Paul called his hearers to believe in the God of creation and providence as their Father in heaven. We don’t have time today to lay out the wrong religious ideas that Paul was condemning, but the God he set before them that day was a God who is present and active in His creation, and who seeks relationship with those He has created in His image. And this was like nothing they had ever heard before. And Paul only mentioned the resurrection of Jesus that day, and that He would one day judge the world, but we see in verse 32 that Paul had other opportunities to preach the gospel. And while many mocked his message, we see in verse 33 that some men and women believed. They came to understand that this sovereign God had sent His Son, Jesus, to earth, to die on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. And they came to know this God not just as the Almighty Creator, but also as their faithful and loving Father. So, terror became trust, fear became faith, abhorrence became adoration.
      1. And you know, our society today may not have temples where people go to offer sacrifices to the gods, but they still worship gods. They do it in stadiums and laboratories and lecture theaters and social media. They look to science and sports and education and politics and sex and getting high or drunk to deliver them from sadness and disease and death.
      2. And if Paul were walking around today, I am sure he would say something like,

*Men and women of New Zealand, I see your ‘religion.’ I see your ‘altars.’ But I also see the emptiness in your eyes and the aching in your hearts. And I see that in your heart there is another altar to an unknown God whom you suspect may be there. You sense that there must be something more than science and sports and sex. Well, what you long for as something unknown is the God who has created you and who sent His own Son to die on the cross that your sins might be forgiven and that you might receive eternal life. Come to Him, today, and submit yourself to His loving and faithful providence.*

1. For it is only to those who know God as their Father in heaven through Christ who find **comfort** of providence. And this is our second and last point.
   1. I said earlier that the nations are under God’s control, nature is under His control, the animals are under His control, He rules Satan and the evil spirits, He uses wicked people to advance His plans, He hardens hearts, He sends trouble and calamity, and He puts to death; in short, He does what He pleases and His purposes cannot be thwarted. Well, there are two ways to react to this:
      1. One way is to see God as a kind of **cosmic puppet-master** who is just playing with His creation.
         1. Sometimes parents look at their children when they play and there doesn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to how they play. They go from one toy to another and then to another, usually leaving one mess after another.
         2. And sadly, that is how many people see God, as a god who plays with creation – a tsunami here, a war there, cancer there, relationship breakup there. None of it seems to have any purpose, and it all seems so cruel. And you hear this all the time when people say, How could a good God let this happen …!
      2. But if you know God as your faithful and loving Father in heaven, then you know that providence means that not a hair can fall from your head apart from His will. You know that there are no accidents. Every late-night phone call or urgent summons to the doctor or breaking news report or unemployment notice or interest rate hike or end of tenancy notice or difficult church meeting comes to you not by chance but by His fatherly hand. And He is the God who sees all things, plans all things, and loves you more than you can know. He is *for* you, not *against* you.
         1. I have told you before about **Joni Eareckson-Tada**. She dived into the water at the beach and hit her head and broke her neck, becoming an instant quadriplegic – paralyzed from the shoulders down. For years she went to healing meeting after healing meeting, convinced that it was not God’s will for her to be a quadriplegic. But finally, she came to believe in the God of providence. And so, she learned to glorify God as a quadriplegic. And she now has a world-wide ministry to the disabled. She has a radio show, she gives talks, she has written books, and her message is always basically the same as Job’s, “*Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD*.”
      3. And Joni is an example of how the knowledge of God’s creation and providence helps us to do three things:
         1. First, to be **patient** when things go against us.
            1. Now, be honest, do you find it easy to be patient when things are against you? I don’t. We typically protest and we rage that is all so unfair.
            2. But let me remind you of the story of **Joseph**. Do you remember the story of Joseph, boys and girls? Sold into slavery by his brothers. Put into prison for a crime he did not commit. But we know the rest of the story, don’t we. He interpreted Pharoah’s dream and was made second in charge for the time of the famine. And finally, when he met his brothers, he said to them, “*Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life … So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt*.”
            3. And we must learn from what happened to Joseph. We must preach to ourselves that God is for us and not against us, that He loves us more than we can know, and that He is working out His good plan for us.
         2. And then, secondly, we must be **thankful** when things go well.
            1. How often have you asked for safe travelling mercies or healing or a job or for money for something and then not gotten round to thanking God on the other side of His giving you what you asked for? Too often, right?
            2. Do you remember what Jesus said about how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven? He said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Well, here in the West, many of us are rich by way of comparison to those in third-world poverty and famine. And this is true of pretty much everyone in NZ, including even beneficiaries. So, we must be very careful to be thankful. It is not by our own efforts that we have what we have; it is all from God.
         3. And then, thirdly and lastly, we can have **good confidence** for the future.
            1. And I don’t know about you, but I find this a tough one. Opposition to the law of God and to Christians seems to be on the rise all over the place. And the ideas and behaviours that people are embracing as normal are increasingly bizarre and disturbing. And we can be certain that to speak against any of this will soon make us liable to arrest or even worse. And I look around at the wider church and I see less and less evidence of faithful worship and godliness. I see denominations that were our once close sisters embracing false doctrine and ungodly behaviour and corrupt worship. And at times I despair of all this. Don’t you?
            2. But this is when we need to remember the doctrine of providence. As one commentator has put it:

*The future which lies ahead is unknown to us and so much may happen in the future. Christendom is threatened from all sides. The Bible reveals some of the things which will happen near the end of time … The book Revelation points out for the believer that the coming times will not be pure joy, but rather dark nights of fear and persecution.*

*But they who in faith look at Him who sits on His throne in heaven and governs everything from there, can courageously step forward into the dark future and say in faith: Whatever happens, nothing will separate me from the love of God.*

*Much can be taken away from us in these dark days: all our possessions which we worked hard for over many years; our beloved ones: man, wife or children, our health or even our own lives; but never ever the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord. This tie can never be severed, on the contrary, this tie, under the providential guidance of God, becomes more secure, until some day, we will be with the Lord eternally and will enjoy His love unhindered.*

The commentator referred to the Book of Revelation. Do you know what the key point of Revelation is? **Jesus is going to win**! How can we be so sure? Because God upholds and rules all things by His eternal counsel and providence. And to those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord, this God is their faithful Father in heaven. And they know that all things come to them, not by chance, but from His fatherly hand. And I hope this includes each one of you. Amen!