



Trend Alert!

THE WAR IN UKRAINE: A TEACHABLE MOMENT FOR OUR KIDS

By Walt Mueller

This Teachable Moment

What questions are your kids verbalizing and pondering as they hear about and process the war in Ukraine? How are they responding to the humanitarian crisis, the fighting, and the knowledge that these things are not just something that happens somewhere else, but which could very well sometime happen here? When crisis hits, our thinking shifts from focusing on the normalcy of our everyday routines, to pondering how to respond to life turning upside-down. Our kids are primed and ready to listen and learn if we are willing to use this time to help them view and navigate the 24/7 newsfeed about the Russo-Ukrainian War through the lens of God's Word.

A teachable moment has been thrown into our laps, giving us the opportunity to fulfill our high calling as parents and youth workers to nurture our children and teens in the Christian faith. To do so will not only help them in their day-to-day efforts to process the realities of this war, but it will prepare them for a lifetime of walking through difficult circumstances, pain, suffering, and heartache with a proper outlook and understanding. What we teach them now will help them manage their fears and anxieties not only during these current days, but for the rest of their lives!

As I have traveled through the confusing emotional and spiritual maze of the last few weeks, the reality of a truth contained in the Bible from cover-to-cover is one that I must lean into in order to gain a peace-filled perspective and great comfort. This truth is serving to sustain and embolden our Ukrainian Christian brothers and sisters enduring the unimaginable events that have turned their lives upside-down. That great truth is a doctrine known as God's *providence*.

While some Christians think that a "doctrine" might be some kind of unnecessary human-created add-on to the Bible, we need to understand that a Christian doctrine is simply a belief based on what is contained *in* the Bible. Not only that, but the word "doctrine" actually points to our responsibility to nurture our children and teens in the faith. It comes from a Latin word (*docere*) which means "to teach" in order to faithfully pass on knowledge from one generation to another.

In today's war-filled culture, understanding the doctrine of providence is necessary for us and our kids if we hope to navigate this well. Think about how reassuring these words from theologian R.C. Sproul are for the Christian: "There is not one piece of cosmic dust that



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is outside the scope of God's sovereign providence." Working to understand the mystery of God's providence might not lead us into an immediate and clear understanding of *what* God is doing, but it can lead us into an immediate and clear understanding of the fact that God *is* doing something for our good and His glory.

What To Teach? God's Providence!

Providence helps us answer the age-old questions we humans ask about who or what rules the world, and who or what is in control. What is *providence*? And, what can we teach our kids about *providence* in the midst of our present teachable moment?

Providence, as taught in the Bible, teaches us that the God who created all things does not step away from His creation, leaving it to chance, fate, luck, or fortune. Rather, God has remained continually involved with all things he has made, directing them as he wills. The Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches us that "God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions" (Q.11). Your kids need to know that because of his providence, God *is* in control!

Providence teaches us that God preserves what he has made. He keeps his creation in existence, preserving what He has made and keeping it all from spinning hopelessly out of control. In Hebrews 1:3 we learn that God "*upholds* the universe by the word of his power." He keeps his creation "being" as he intended it to be. He is sustaining, renewing, preserving, ordering, and keeping what he has made. In Colossians 1:16&17, Paul tells us that the God-man, Jesus Christ, was not only the Creator of all things, but that he "holds together" all that he has created. For example, because of providence, the law of gravity remains the law of gravity, fire is hot, snow is cold, and water is wet.

Providence teaches us that God works in the midst of all circumstances. Even in the actions we take as a result of our own individual decisions, choices, and inclinations he is at work to bring about his will and way in our lives. Yes, it is a mystery with two clear sides to it: we *do* make real choices on our own, while God *does* "fashion our hearts" (Psalm 33:15). Proverbs 16:9 recognizes this fact: "The heart of a man plans



his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." A clear example of this is found in the story of Joseph. Sold into slavery by his brothers as an act of evil, God used Joseph's circumstances to ultimately provide for his family in the midst of a great famine. God's providence is evident in Joseph's words to his brothers: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Even those actions and circumstances that are clearly evil are doorways for God - who is not the author or cause of evil - to work in our lives and bring us to a deeper knowledge of his love.

Providence teaches us that God directs all things in history and human actions to his appointed end. God is a "hands-on" God who cares for and loves his creation and his people. As John Calvin has said, "Nothing takes place without his deliberation." And what is his appointed end? In the larger scope of human history, God is working out his great plan of redemption to restore the goodness of his creation that was broken by our sin (Genesis 3). That plan of redemption is being worked out in history through the coming of Jesus Christ and his work on the cross as he redeems people from their sin, and it will one day result in the renewal of things. In the individual scope of our own lives, Paul reminds us that through providence, "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). He is always at work, through good and bad, drawing us more deeply into our relationship with him, while conforming us to his will and way.

Making Providence Real To Our Kids

So, what now? How can we lead our kids into a deeper understanding of providence over the course these confusing war-filled days?

First, ask good questions of each other that spark discussion.

- How have you seen God work in the good circumstances and experiences of your life?
- How have you seen God work in the difficult circumstances of your life?
- How has God worked in your life since the war began, and how has that changed things?
- What might God be doing in the world in spite of the presence of evil and war?

Second, continually point out the reality of God's providence. Yes, it's a mystery. But God is at work. Here are some realities I've learned as a result of difficulties in my life and the perspective I've gained as I've studied God's providence. These are realities you can teach your kids in the midst of our current difficulties:

- God is always at work in his world.
- God's providence shows us his deep love for us.
- We need to trust that God is at work even when we don't see it, feel it, or know the reason for what is happening.
- I am not in control of the world. I am called to be a faithful and obedient follower of Jesus Christ.
- "Difficult providences" are adversities that bring blessings. Even though it feels like they might undo us, God uses these to grow us. Consider the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 119:71 – "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."
- In his providence, God uses our difficult circumstances as his "curriculum" for teaching us what we need to know to grow in our dependence on him.
- To find our way in the midst of difficulties and suffering we must stay centered on God's Word. Read God's Word regularly to gain perspective.

- Difficult circumstances lead us to the end of ourselves and into Him. It is a good thing when we are forced to stop relying on ourselves, when questions go unanswered, and we are driven to rely on God.

- We can gain comfort in our suffering when we know that there is a purpose and plan. . . even though we don't see it or feel it.

- God wants us to talk to him about what we are going through. Prayer is a gift. And, God welcomes our complaints, our confusion, and our cries.

God's providence does not diminish or ignore the fact that there is great evil continuing to unfold in our world. However, it offers us and our kids an anchor of great hope. And, it is through providence that we've been given this teachable moment and golden opportunity to teach our kids great lessons about providence!

Prayers

Take time with your kids during these confusing, difficult, and frightening times. . . and even beyond to pray prayers like these:

"Lord, I already have enough history with you to see that my driest and poorest times have been my richest. I still dread such periods, and that is right, but help me not to give up on them or forget that you are working out great things. Amen." (from Tim Keller, *The Songs Of Jesus*, p. 206).

"Father, when you lead us into difficult seasons, it's not to punish us but to prosper us. When you send hardships, it's not to bring us harm but to give us hope. When you discipline us, it's not to send us into the 'doghouse' of your displeasure, but to guarantee our good future." (from Scotty Smith, *Everyday Prayers*, p. 305).

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A Timeless Truth To Ponder

Some of the greatest and most moving messages about God's providence come from those who have experienced that providence in the most difficult of life's circumstances. I have found that there is an amazing wealth of lessons like these in many of the old hymns and the stories behind them. Since most of us never get to hear or sing them these days, we are missing out on some great encouragement and instruction.

On the first Sunday morning after Russia attacked the Ukraine, our church worshipped together by singing the hymn "God Moves In A Mysterious Way" by William Cowper. The lyrics (see on the right) are full of great truths. The lyrics are more powerful when you know why Cowper penned them.

William Cowper's life was marked by continued pain and difficulty. His most enduring pain was the mental pain of unrelenting depression. Over the course of his life he battled major bouts of depression four times, and on several occasions he attempted suicide. In 1764, while in residence at an insane asylum, he opened a Bible that he found sitting outside on a garden bench. He came to faith in Jesus Christ after reading John 11 and Romans 3:25. Eventually, still battling difficult circumstances until the end of his life, Cowper wrote this hymn.

Sit as a family. Find the hymn on YouTube. Listen together, and talk about the great truths of Scripture that Cowper has woven into this moving hymn.

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"God Moves In A Mysterious Way"

1. God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.
2. Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sov'reign will.
3. Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.
4. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.
5. His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.
6. Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.



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