

THE DECREES OF GOD

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THE DECREE OF GOD IS HIS PURPOSE OR DETERMINATION with respect to future things. We have used the singular number as Scripture does (Rom 8:28; Eph 3:11), because there was only one act of His infinite mind about future things. But *we* speak as if there had been many, because our minds are only capable of thinking of *successive* revolutions, as thoughts and occasions arise, or in reference to the various *objects* of His decree, which being many seem to us to require a distinct purpose for each one. But an infinite understanding does not proceed by steps, from one stage to another: “Known unto God are *all* His works from the beginning of the world” (Acts 15:18).

The Scriptures make mention of the decrees of God in many passages, and under a variety of terms. The word “decree” is found in Psalm 2:7. In Ephesians 3:11 we read of His “eternal purpose.” In Acts 2:23 of His “determinate counsel and foreknowledge.” In Ephesians 1:9 of the mystery of His “will.” In Romans 8:29 that He also did “predestinate.” In Ephesians 1:9 of His “good pleasure.” God’s decrees are called His “counsel” to signify they are consummately wise. They are called God’s “will” to show He was under no control, but acted according to His own pleasure. When a man’s will is the rule of his conduct, it is usually capricious and unreasonable; but *wisdom* is always associated with “will” in the Divine proceedings, and accordingly, God’s decrees are said to be “the counsel of His own will” (Eph 1:11).

The decrees of God relate to all future things without exception: whatever is done in time was foreordained before time began. God’s purpose was concerned with everything, whether great or small, whether good or evil, although with reference to the latter we must be careful to state that while God is the Orderer and Controller of sin, He is *not* the Author of it in the same way that He is the Author of good. Sin could not proceed from a holy God by positive and direct creation, but only by decretive permission and negative action. God’s decree is as comprehensive as His government, extending to all creatures and all events. It was concerned about our life and death; about our state in time, and our state in eternity. As God works *all* things after the counsel of His own will, we learn from His works what His counsel is (was), as we judge of an architect’s plan by inspecting the building which was erected under his directions.

God did not merely decree to make man, place him upon the earth, and then leave him to his own uncontrolled guidance; instead, He fixed all the circumstances in the lot of individuals, and all the particulars which will comprise the history of the human race from its commencement to its close. He did not merely decree that general laws should be established for the government of the world, but He settled the *application* of those laws to all particular cases. Our days are numbered, and so are the hairs of our heads. We may learn what is the *extent* of the Divine decrees from the dispensations of providence, in which they are executed. The care of Providence reaches to the most insignificant creatures, and the most minute events—the death of a sparrow, and the fall of a hair.

Let us now consider some of the *properties* of the Divine decrees. First, they are *eternal*. To suppose any of them to be made in time is to suppose that some new occasion has occurred; some unforeseen event or combination of circumstances has arisen, which has induced the Most High to form a new resolution. This would argue that the knowledge of the Deity is limited, and that He is growing wiser in the progress of time—which would be horrible blasphemy. No man who believes that the Divine understanding is infinite, comprehending the past, the present, and the future, will ever assent to the erroneous doctrine of temporal decrees. God is not ignorant of future events which will be executed by human volitions; He has foretold them in innumerable instances, and prophecy is but the *manifestation* of His eternal prescience. Scripture affirms that believers were chosen in Christ before the world began (Eph 1:4), yea, that grace was “given” to them then (II Tim 1:9).

Secondly, the decrees of God are *wise*. Wisdom is shown in the selection of the best possible ends and of the fittest means of accomplishing them. That this character belongs to the decrees of God is evident from what we know of them. They are disclosed to us *by their execution*, and every proof of wisdom in the works of God is a proof of the wisdom of the *plan*, in conformity to which they are performed. As the Psalmist declared, “O LORD, how manifold are Thy works! in wisdom hast Thou made them all” (104:24). It is

indeed but a very small part of them which falls under our observation, yet, we ought to proceed here as we do in other cases, and judge of the whole by the specimen, of what is unknown, by what is known. He who perceives the workings of admirable skill in the parts of a machine which he has an opportunity to examine, is naturally led to believe that the other parts are equally admirable. In like manner we should satisfy our minds as to God's works when doubts obtrude themselves upon us, and repel any objections that may be suggested by something that we cannot reconcile to *our* notions of what is good and wise. When we reach the bounds of the finite and gaze toward the mysterious realm of the infinite, let us exclaim, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Rom 11:33).

Thirdly, they are *free*. "Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being His counsellor hath taught Him? With whom took He counsel, and who instructed Him, and taught Him in the path of judgment, and taught Him knowledge, and shewed to Him the way of understanding?" (Isa 40:13-14). God was alone when He made His decrees, and His determinations were influenced by no external cause. He was free to decree or not to decree, and to decree one thing and not another. This liberty we must ascribe to Him who is Supreme, Independent, and Sovereign in all His doings.

Fourthly, they are *absolute and unconditional*. The execution of them is not suspended upon any condition which may, or may not be, performed. In every instance where God has decreed an end, He has also decreed every means to that end. The One who decreed the salvation of His elect also decreed to work faith in them (II Thess 2:13). "My counsel shall stand, and I will do *all* My pleasure" (Isa 46:10): but that could not be, if His counsel depended upon a condition which might not be performed. But God "worketh all things after the counsel of His own will" (Eph 1:11).

Side by side with the immutability and invincibility of God's decrees, Scripture plainly teaches that man is a responsible creature and answerable for his actions. And if our thoughts are formed from God's Word the maintenance of the one will not lead to the denial of the other. That there is a real difficulty in defining where the one ends and the other begins is freely granted. This is ever the case where there is a conjunction of the Divine and the human. Real prayer is indited by the Spirit, yet it is also the cry of a human heart. The Scriptures are the inspired Word of God, yet they were written by men who were something more than machines in the hand of the Spirit. Christ is both God and man. He is Omniscient, yet "increased in wisdom" (Luke 2:52). He was Almighty, yet was "crucified through weakness" (II Cor 13:4). He was the Prince of life, yet He died. High mysteries are these, yet faith receives them unquestioningly.

It has often been pointed out in the past that every objection made against the eternal decrees of God applies with equal force against His eternal foreknowledge.

Whether God has decreed all things that ever come to pass or not, all that own the being of a God, own that He knows all things beforehand. Now, it is self-evident that if He knows all things beforehand, He either doth approve of them or doth not approve of them; that is, He either is willing they should be, or He is not willing they should be. But to will that they *should be* is to decree them (Jonathan Edwards).

Finally, attempt, with me, to assume and then to contemplate the opposite. To *deny* the Divine decrees would be to predicate a world and all its concerns regulated by *un* designed chance or blind fate. Then what peace, what assurance, what comfort would there be for our poor hearts and minds? What refuge would there be to fly to in the hour of need and trial? None at all. There would be nothing better than the black darkness and abject horror of atheism. O my reader, how thankful should we be that everything *is* determined by infinite wisdom and goodness! What praise and gratitude are due unto God *for* His Divine decrees. It is because of them that "*we know* that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom 8:28). Well may we exclaim, "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: *to Whom be glory* for ever. Amen" (Rom 11:36).