

Introduction: “Whatever Comes to Pass?”

Last week,

Joel told us the story of the revelation of the Triune God from creation to new creation.
Tonight we look at the *decree* of the Triune God.

So what are the decrees of God?

Today the doctrine of God's decrees receives short shrift in most evangelical churches.
Modern translations of scripture rarely use the term,
so many people think that the idea is unbiblical.

Yet many passages of scripture talk about God's counsel,
God's foreknowledge,

and otherwise mention decisions which God made
"before the foundation of the world"

(Mt. 25:34; Jn 17:5; Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8; 17:8).

Question seven of our Shorter Catechism explains that

Q. 7. What are the decrees of God?

A. The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

Q. 8. How doth God execute his decrees?

A. God executeth his decrees in the works of creation and providence.

This is more fully expounded in the Westminster Confession:

“God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will,
freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass;
yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin,
nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures;
nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away,
but rather established.” (Confession 3.1)

I want you to see that Reformed doctrine insists on maintaining two (seemingly opposite) things:

- 1) God has foreordained whatsoever comes pass;
- 2) this foreordination *establishes* the liberty and contingency of the will.

We just finished going through the book of Jeremiah.

After the fall of Jerusalem,

Jeremiah sang his lament over the Holy City.

False prophets had said for generations that God would never bring destruction
to Jerusalem—his holy city.

But Lamentations understands the truth:

*Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?
Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins? (3:37-39)*

This is a difficult statement.

Jeremiah says that both good and bad come from the mouth of the Most High.

The Hebrew only makes it more difficult –

because the Hebrew word for “bad” is also the word for “evil,”
or “calamity,” or “disaster.”

Jeremiah says that good things and bad things

both come from the mouth of the Most High.

What do we do with this?

The Reformed have always affirmed two things:

- 1) God is sovereign over all things, so yes, all things come from God;
- but 2) God is *not* the author of sin – so while evil may come from God in some sense, good and evil come from God in different ways.

Now, in one sense this is a really hard teaching.

We don’t like to think that bad things come from God.

Some people say that good things come from God – and bad things come from the devil.

But let’s take a common example – the death of a child.

But Christian theology has historically asserted that God is eternal –
and that God knows all things from the beginning.

To put it in its most basic form,

if God knows all things from before the foundation of the world,
then that means that God knew about the death of the child,
and so the fact that God created *this* world with *this* story line,
means that God *intended* (in some sense) everything that has happened in human history.

It doesn’t work to say that God intended all the good stuff,
so all the bad stuff is “accidental.”

Jeremiah makes it clear that the bad, as well as the good, comes from God.

So all Christians – Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Calvinist, Arminian –

all Christians believe that God brought about (in some sense)
everything that happens in history.

Now, many have suggested that God simply permits whatever may come to pass,
as a general decree in which God declares that he will put his stamp
on whatever the creature does.

This does not fit what Lamentations says,
because it suggests that either God does not know what the creature will do,
or else God is unable or unwilling to prevent things which he does not want.

But Lamentations says that it is from the mouth of the Most High that both good and bad come.

God is not the author of evil,
yet he does decree it and ordain it for his glory and our salvation.

God has foreordained every event,
from the beginning of creation through the end of history,
and yet the Reformed insist that this does not destroy the liberty of the creature,
but rather establishes it.

After all, after saying that the decree—the command of the Lord
—is what brings all things to pass,
Lamentations 3 goes on to say,
“Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord!
Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven:
‘We have transgressed and rebelled and you have not forgiven.’”
The fact that God ordains all things brings hope.
Because that also means that God has the power to forgive.

The decree does not nullify the will of the creature,
but rather establishes and enables it!

Indeed, if you think about it from a scientific standpoint, what is “free will”?
I’ve heard atheistic scientists say that free will is just an illusion.
After all, if you could exhaustively understand your genetic code,
together with all of the variables that come from diet and other “input” –
then, according to a purely naturalistic, materialistic account of the world,
you could accurately predict everything!

Materialistic science provides no room for freedom.

Scripture does.

Because scripture says that there is a God who is not bound to space and time.
And his knowledge of all things is not gained by exhaustive study –
no, his knowledge is constitutive of all things;
when God knows something, it comes into being!

And therefore, if you could know every little detail about all of creation,
you still could not predict everything accurately,
because God has established the liberty and contingency of his creatures.

Ephesians 1 provides one of the clearest summaries of Paul's teaching about God's decrees (God's eternal purpose).

There is a Trinitarian structure to the chapter –
we were chosen by the Father before the foundation of the world;
we were redeemed by the Son, through his blood shed on the cross;
and we were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,
who is the guarantee of our inheritance.

So Ephesians 1 speaks of
redemption predestined,
redemption accomplished,
and redemption applied;
and while the whole Trinity is involved in each part,
nonetheless, there is a certain economy – a certain arrangement –
of the work of the Triune God.

The Father *chose us* – but he chose us *in Christ*.
The Son *redeemed us* – but he redeemed us *according to the Father's purpose*.
And the Spirit *sealed us* – but he sealed us *for the inheritance of the Son*,
according to the purpose of him who works all things
according to the counsel of his will.

And then having set forth this Trinitarian pattern in verses 3-14,
Paul sums it all up in verses 15-23 with a Trinitarian prayer:
“that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,
may give you a Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.”

What do we mean by God's “eternal purpose”?

1. “His Eternal Purpose”: (Ephesians 1:3-10)

³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,* ⁴ *even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love* ⁵ *he predestined us^[b] for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,* ⁶ *to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.* ⁷ *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,* ⁸ *which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight* ⁹ *making known^[c] to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ* ¹⁰ *as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

In verse 5, Paul talks about “the purpose of his will” –
and again in verse 9, he speaks of “the mystery of his will, according to his purpose.”

In verses 5 and 9, the word translated “purpose” is “eudokia” –

which could also be translated “good pleasure.”

This word is used by Jesus in Matthew 11:26 to speak of God’s “good pleasure” to reveal the hidden things to babes, rather than the wise.

Paul uses it in Phil 2:13,

when he says to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,
for it is God who is at work in you to will and to do for his *good pleasure*
(his purpose).”

So, when “eudokia” is used of God, it refers to God’s purpose and plan.

It is regularly used to describe God’s sovereign purpose – his *good pleasure* in history.

It is arguable that “good pleasure” could refer to the things that God *desires* to happen.

But not everything in history happens according to God’s *good pleasure*.

(For instance, if someone said that little children were slaughtered according to God’s “good pleasure” he would have been *wrong!*)

Because eudokia – “good pleasure” – refers to God’s *good purposes* in history.

And verses 3-10 are focused on God’s *good purposes* for history.

Paul’s emphasis is on God’s electing love

which chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world,

which predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ,

according to the *eudokia* of his will [the good purpose of his will]

And all of this is part of “his purpose” [eudokia]

which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time,

to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

God’s purpose – God’s good pleasure for history –

is a plan to unite all things in Christ.

It is nothing less than a plan for the cosmic redemption of all things.

So what do we do with Jeremiah’s darker statement:

“is it not from the hand of the Most High that good and evil come?”

That’s where verse 11 comes in,

because there is a second word for “purpose” used in verse 11 (*prothesis*).

2. “According to the Counsel of His Will” (Ephesians 1:11-14)

¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee^[d] of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it,^[e] to the praise of his glory.

Paul says, “In him we have obtained an inheritance,
having been predestined according to the purpose [prothesis]
of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.”

“Prothesis” is rooted in the verb “protithemi” which means “to place forth” (publicly).

If *eudokia* emphasizes God’s *good pleasure*,
prothesis focuses on God’s public enactments.

Indeed, Paul elsewhere uses “prothesis” in contexts which may include the “bad things”:
Romans 8:28 – “we know that all things work together for good for those who love God,
who are called according to his *purpose*”
Romans 9:11 – with reference to Jacob and Esau, “though they were not yet born
and had done nothing either good or bad –
in order that God’s *purpose* of election might continue,
not because of works but because of him who calls –
she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’”

In both of these settings,
God winds up using bad things for good ends.
This is very much like Jeremiah’s point in Lamentations 3 –
God’s purpose will work all things together for good [in the end] –
and yet the bad things remain bad things *in the middle*.

Paul also uses this word, *prothesis*, to speak of God’s “eternal purpose”:
2 Timothy 1:9 – God “Saved us and called us to a holy calling,
not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace,
which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,
and which now has been manifested
through the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ.”
Likewise, in Ephesians 3:11, Paul speaks of his preaching ministry as
“according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

God’s purpose for the ages will stand – the purpose for which he created all things –
the purpose for which he redeemed us through the blood of Christ –
the purpose and plan which he set forth in Christ for the end of all things.

And that purpose encompasses everything.
“We have been predestined according to the purpose of him
who works all things according to the counsel of his will.”

Or to use the Shorter Catechism’s way of saying it:

A. The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will,
whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

Now, I realize that this doctrine can be hard to stomach for some.
I think part of the problem is that people focus on particular details.
If God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass,
then that means that he foreordained the suffering of that child.

We sometimes lose sight of what God's foreordination is all about.
It's not as though God sat there in eternity past
and planned out each little detail ["And then if I say this, then they'll do that..."].
You see, God does not know the world in the way that we do.
We learn – we investigate – we study.

Our knowledge is the product of inquiry.

God, on the other hand, does not need to inquire!
His knowledge is what constitutes reality!

Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am."
It would be more accurate to say, "God thinks, therefore I am!"

But it would be better to think about this
the way that *Paul* talks about it here in Ephesians 1.

Because Paul talks about God's eternal purpose *in Christ*.

3. "In Christ" (Ephesians 1:15-23)

¹⁵ For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love^[1] toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Christ is the heart and soul of the doctrine of the decrees.

Look back over Paul's way of saying it in verses 3-14:

He has blessed us "in Christ" with every spiritual blessing;
In love he predestined us for adoption as sons *through Jesus Christ*...
In him we have redemption through his blood...
And God's purpose is set forth *in Christ* – to unite all things *in him*...
In him we have obtained an inheritance,

having been predestined according to his purpose.
And *in him* we have been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

The decree is not some fatalistic, arbitrary pronouncement
which yanks us into the kingdom of heaven.

Rather, we are predestined in Christ.
Jesus Christ (the eternal Son of God) brings the plan of God into history.

In him there is no abstraction.
God himself entered history – and became united to our nature.
His incarnation, his death, his resurrection,
his being seated at the right hand of the Father on our behalf
ensure that we cannot think abstractly about the decrees of God.

In Acts 4, the apostles and believers in Jerusalem are rejoicing in the power of God,
and they pray:
*Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them,
who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,
'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed –
for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus,
whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate,
along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,
[and note this:] to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.
(Acts 4:24-28)*

Jesus was predestined to die according to God's own plan.
This does not remove human responsibility–
after all, Herod, Pilate, and the people are all blamed for his death–
but it does show that the cross was decreed by God.
You can never say that God does not foreordain evil.
The crucifixion of Jesus–the most evil act since Satan's rebellion–
was predestined by God.
And yet the crucifixion of Jesus was also the free act of Herod, Pilate, and the people.
As Peter says in Acts 2:23–
“This Jesus,
delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God,
you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”

This is indeed the way that the scriptures speak of salvation.
All of salvation is found in Christ.
Even faith is a gift (Eph. 2:8-9).
The work of salvation is the gracious work of God.

Yet the act of faith which we ourselves make
--the confession of sin which we humbly make before God,
begging his forgiveness--these are free actions.
God does not force us to make them.
But still we believe in irresistible grace.
God woos us to himself, but his wooing always works--
for those he called, he also justified, sanctified and glorified--in Christ
(Rom. 8:28-30).

We stand before a God who is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable
in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.
His knowledge, wisdom, and being are original, uncreated, and absolute.
Our freedom and sovereignty must always be understood
as a limited freedom and sovereignty
under the absolute and unconditional freedom and sovereignty of God.

Therefore, no matter what position you take in the attempt to explain sin and evil,
God must always be regarded as sovereign.

Even those who say that God limited himself when he created man--
giving man absolute freedom outside of God's freedom and sovereignty--
even this view makes God the ultimate cause of evil,
because by giving man this autonomy,
God "started the ball rolling" toward sin.

But this faulty understanding of God's decrees
also undermines the role of ultimate and proximate causes.
To say that God is not the ultimate cause is to say that man (or Satan) is.
This would mean that man's sinful and wicked actions are outside the sovereignty of God.
But then, how would you deal with Ephesians 1:11?
Can God be said to work "all things" according to the counsel of his will,
if man has a region of sovereignty which God cannot touch?
(even by his own self-limitation)?
Such a God must deal with a power in the universe
(namely, man's absolutely free and sovereign sinfulness)
that God has no control over.
In order for God to save man, in such a world,
he would first have to take away the freedom which he gave man!
In this view, for God to regain control over man, and conquer man's sovereign sinfulness,
he must violate and revoke the freedom which he gave to man.
This would turn freedom into a curse,
because it forces God to take away his gift of freedom

in order for him to save us!
We are left with the choice between freedom to sin, and bondage to God.

Scripture presents the opposite alternative.

True freedom is obedience to God,
and bondage comes only when we attempt to set up our own autonomy and
freedom

outside of God's freedom and sovereignty.

Bondage comes precisely because we cannot escape from God.

It is because God is the free and sovereign Lord of the universe
that we find ourselves in shackles when we try to deny this reality.

I would like to close with one final point!

Yes, all individual events are foreordained--but what is an individual event?

When does an event start?

Or when does it stop?

When I finish preaching this sermon,
what happens to the event?

It did not begin with my speaking,
but with my sermon preparation earlier this week.

But that was not the beginning, either.

Because this sermon is bound up
with discussions with friends and reading and study but no,
not even there, because those "events"
were based on past events and debates
which occurred long before I was born.

And the "event" of this sermon is not complete until you digest it.

Indeed, this sermon is a part of a story that began with the creation of the world,
and will not end until the consummation--
which itself is just the beginning of a new story.

In other words, when we say that God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass,
we are confessing that the whole story of humanity
is the story that God has decreed.

The decrees of God must always be viewed in light of the cross.

It is only in God's redemptive acts, surrendering his life for ours in Christ,
that we can see the meaning of the decrees.

If all you learn from this is that the decrees of God
can only be seen in light of redemptive history--

that the two come together in Christ--
then I will be content;

because Christ is the heart and soul of the decrees.