

# Westminster Larger Catechism

## *Question 12*

Halifax, 7 October 2007

### **Q. 12 What are the decrees of God?**

**A. God's decrees are the wise, free, and holy acts of the counsel of his will, whereby, from all eternity, he hath, for his own glory, unchangeably foreordained whatsoever comes to pass in time, especially concerning angels and men.**

### **Introduction:**

Before our scripture reading, I want to make a couple of observations about what the Catechism says about a decree...

- The decree is like the master plan of God for this world that transcends this world.
  - It is as if God planned out every last detail before He made the world...
    - and now is carrying out that plan.
- The decrees are called “acts” in the same way that “motions” are called “actions” in a business meeting...
  - It is not a physical action, but a counsel action—something that is determined or decided by the organization.
    - It is “an act of the counsel of the organization’s will.”
      - It is not that they have actually done the thing yet...
      - But it is an act of counsel—the action is that they have purposed to do it and have acted to adopt the plan.
- And so what the Catechism is saying here is that God has already acted to plan out everything that is ever to happen in this world...
  - History is simply the carrying out of His plan.
  - Ephesians 1:11 states expressly that this is so when it says that God:
    - “works all things according to the counsel of His will...”
    - In other words, He does exactly what He has planned—nothing more, nothing less.

And so it is that as we look out at the world and we see the world going on and on,

- We have here an answer to some of our deepest questions...
  - Why do things happen the way they do?

- Why is the world here at all?
- Why was I born at this time in history?
- Why do I have a certain level of intelligence, certain opportunities, certain relationships...
- Why do human beings have arms and legs and eyes,
  - and why do hippopotamuses have such big mouths?
  - It is because God decreed that it should be so!

I remember speaking to a professor from St. Mary's a few years ago who told me he didn't need to know why.

- Although not everyone would admit it as readily as this professor did, most people are like him...
  - They are just existing—just living their lives without even knowing the most basic question of all—why they are here.
  - It's a sure sign that they are not really living, but dead...
    - A person is dead when he doesn't respond to whatever is around him...
    - His corpse is there, but he has no interaction with heat or cold, with other people, with food, with anything—he is dead.
      - When a person is spiritually dead, he lives (or tries to live) apart from God who is the very reason we exist and have our being.

The only way to live is to return to God through Christ, and then to abide in the word of Christ—

- Then you are free—free to live unto God—not longer in bondage to death...
- Then “why” becomes a reality...you know what life is about—you know why you are here...
  - You know that God is behind it all and you begin to respond to Him in all of life.
  - That is what real living is—that is eternal life—it's life with God.

Tonight I have selected one verse for my text that tells us plainly that everything has reference to God: Romans 11:36.

- This passage makes it clear that there is no such thing as a brute fact or as a random event that is not connected to God...
  - all things pertain to Him...
- Listen now as I read to you from Romans 11:36:
  - **Rom. 11:36: “For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever Amen.”**
  - oti ex autou kai di autou kai eiv auton ta panta autw h doxa eiv touv aiwnav amhn

Each of these phrases tells us how all things are related to God.

**I. First, all things are “of (or from or out of) Him.”** *ex autou*

A. This means that He is the originator of all things.

1. This is true because God is the Creator of all that has ever been created.
  - This includes people and galaxies and bacteria.
  - Only God is self-existing, everything else is of Him.
  - We know this because He has told us so:
    - **Heb 11:3: By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.**
    - Understand that faith is not a leap in the dark at all—
      - just randomly believing that something is true...
      - Faith is believing the testimony of God, and God tells us in His holy word that He made all things...
        - That is why Heb 11:3 says
          - “By *faith* we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible...”
2. But this is not to say that God directly created all things.
  - He created many things with the ability to produce and to reproduce.
  - God then blessed them and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply.
  - But because God made the original, He is the ultimate source of all things.
  - All things are *of* Him.

TRANS> And this is not all—

- There is even a more intimate connection between God and all things.
- B. All things are of Him because God is the one who is ultimately responsible for bringing about the increase—
- His creatures produce according to His predetermined counsel.
  - The Bible calls us to give thanks to God for all our blessings because they are of Him—even the things that come mediately through other things...
    - Psalm 104:10-24 makes this clear...

- 10 He sends the springs into the valleys, they flow among the hills.
- 11 They give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
- 12 By them the birds of the heavens have their home; they sing among the branches.
- 13 He waters the hills from His upper chambers; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your works.
- 14 He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the service of man, that he may bring forth food from the earth,
- 15 And wine *that* makes glad the heart of man, oil to make *his* face shine, and bread *which* strengthens man's heart.
- 16 The trees of the LORD are full of *sap*, the cedars of Lebanon which He planted,
- 17 Where the birds make their nests; the stork has her home in the fir trees.
- 18 The high hills *are* for the wild goats; the cliffs are a refuge for the rock badgers.
- 19 He appointed the moon for seasons; the sun knows its going down.
- 20 You make darkness, and it is night, in which all the beasts of the forest creep about.
- 21 The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their food from God.
- 22 *When* the sun rises, they gather together and lie down in their dens.
- 23 Man goes out to his work and to his labor until the evening.
- 24 O LORD, how manifold are Your works! in wisdom You have made them all. the earth is full of Your possessions—

- To put this into the modern context,
  - why you see a plane fly and then land,
  - it is all done according to the laws of physics and second causes,
    - but ultimately, the LORD is picking up the plane and setting it down where He has determined.

1. Did the apple you ate last week come to you from the grocery store?
  - And before that from a delivery truck?
  - And before that from a farmer?
  - And before that from a seed?
  - Very well—but God is the one who not only created the original apple with all the other apples coded into it,
    - He is also the one who saw to it that it eventually reached your belly...
  - There were a thousand things that could have kept it from reaching your belly...
    - You could have been too sick to eat,
      - too poor to pay for it,
      - the store could have burned down,
      - the delivery truck could have crashed or come to place where a bridge was washed out by a storm,
      - the farmer might have been lazy and put the harvest in too late,
      - there might have been a drought,
      - the seeds could have been bad...
      - or God might never have created that food in the first place!

- The only reason you have it is because God purposed that you should have it.
2. Do you see why the Bible says that every good and perfect gift comes from above? (James 1:17)
- Do you see why you ought to give thanks for everything?
  - He is behind it all—
    - all things are from Him.
    - When you open your birthday gifts, you say, “who is that one from?”
      - According to James 1:17,
        - everything has God’s name on the package.
        - He is the One who saw to it that it got to you.
- C. But do you know that the Bible also makes it clear that God is behind the undesirable things that come into the world?
1. Job knew this.
- a. From the start (when his trials came), he acknowledged that God had a right to take everything from him because God had given him everything.
- **Job 1:20-21: Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped. And he said: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.” In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong.**
  - **Job 2:9-10: Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!” But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.**
  - Job did not doubt that everything that came to him, both good and bad was from God...
    - and he was right about that.
- b. But as the days went on,
- Job began to struggle and to wish that he had never been born,
    - and he began to question God—though not to charge Him with wrong.
  - When God at last appeared to Job, He did not say, “Job, it wasn’t me, it was Satan!”

- Somehow, imagining that God has nothing to do with our troubles seems to bring comfort to a lot of people...
  - And I suppose it makes sense that it would, for we don't like to face the fact that all of our sorrows are rooted in God's curse upon us because of our sin...
- But consider what a desperate situation we would be in if our troubles were **not** from God!
  - It would suggest that there is some sort of power independent of God's power...
- Let me see if I can illustrate what I am getting at...
  - Suppose you have a big dog on a leash
    - Suddenly the dog begins to bark ferociously in the direction of a little child playing in the park...
    - And you turn the dog loose and off it runs toward the child!
  - What would the child's mother think of you?
    - She would be horrified!
    - Would she be appeased if you said,
      - "It wasn't me that went barking after your child, it was my dog. I only let dog do what he wanted to do..."
    - She would say,
      - "Yes, but you had power over the dog to control the dog. You turned him loose. You knew that he would run toward my child. You are responsible because you had full power to stop him."
      - And she is right...
        - You let the dog go because for some reason you wanted the dog to go charging toward the child!
        - If God has power to stop Satan, and He does not stop him, then it is because, for some reason, He has willed that Satan do whatever He has released him to do.
- But suppose the woman knew you so well that she absolutely trusted you—then she would want to know why you let the dog go.
  - And suppose it was that you saw what the dog was barking at—that it was not the child, but a bobcat that was about to attack the child!

- Now the mother would praise you for letting the dog go because of the purpose for which you did it.
2. If God is upholding (sustaining) Satan the whole time He is acting, then God is also doing what Satan does.
- But God has different purposes than Satan in carrying out the very same act.
- a. Take a look at Isaiah 10:5-15
- Here we are told that the Assyrian has his purpose:
    - to destroy and build a kingdom of man.
  - But we are also told that God has His own purpose with the Assyrian:
    - to chasten and purify the city of God.
    - God is the one who claims to have sent the Assyrian to do this work.
      - God is doing something through the Assyrian and the Assyrian is doing his own thing—
        - but God is the one behind it all.
- b. In nothing is this brought out more clearly than in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.
- Whose will was done in this act?
    - Acts 4:27-28 tells us that above all else, God’s will was done!
      - “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.”
    - So you see that above all else, God’s will was done.
      - But under Him, Satan’s will was done.
      - And under Him, the will of the high priests was done...
      - And the will of Judas.
    - Each had different purposes.
      - God did it to redeem His people
      - Satan did it to try to get rid of God’s Son
      - The high priests and Pharisees did it because of envy
      - And Judas did it out of hatred.
  - Do you see the point?
    - Ultimately, the thing was “of God.”

This is why God did not correct Job—when He questioned what God had done—by saying,

- Oh Job, it was not me, it was Satan.
- It was Satan—but it was God also!
  - God corrected Job by humbling him and showing Job that Job was too small to question God.
    - Job 38:
      - **1 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said:**
      - 2 “Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?**
      - 3 Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me.**
      - 4 Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding.**
      - 5 Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?**
      - 6 To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone,**
      - 7 when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?**
  - And the LORD goes on and on telling Job about all the things He is managing from the birth of animals in the woods to the creatures at the bottom of the sea.
    - Job gets the message
      - Job 40:
        - **1 Moreover the LORD answered Job, and said:**
        - **2 “Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? He who rebukes God, let him answer it.”**
        - **3 Then Job answered the LORD and said:**
        - **4 “Behold, I am vile; What shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth.**
        - **5 Once I have spoken, but I will not answer; yes, twice, but I will proceed no further.”**
- All along, Job knew that everything comes from God.
  - He was right about that...
  - His problem was that he began to question God as to whether He knew what He was doing...
    - And the LORD told Job that his questions were inappropriate because he is too small to understand.

All things are from God (or of God)

**II. But Romans 11 also says that all things are “through Him.”**



A. I have already explained this essentially—

- That things are **through Him** means, you might say, that everything that happens passes through Him...
  - In other words, nothing reaches this world, nothing is made and nothing is done, unless God has willed it to be so.
- It always goes **through** Him, or more accurately, it is done **by** Him so that He is the primary agent.
  - This is what I just demonstrated with the crucifixion...
    - Many diverse wills were done, but God was the primary agent and He had His purposes.
    - The crucifixion was done through Him or by Him because He had purposed it from all eternity, long before the men who laid hands on the Lord were even born.
  - Likewise, I demonstrated this with Job—
    - Although Satan did it, God was the primary agent that afflicted Job.
    - Satan did it for evil purposes, but God did it for good and righteous purposes.

B. God is like the one who writes a story—

- and we are the characters who live out the story.
- 1. We always do exactly what He has planned because He works all things after the counsel of His will.
  - That is not the same as saying we always obey Him.
    - We don't.
    - But we always do what He has planned.
- 2. This in no way takes away our freedom to act.
  - The characters in a story each have their own motives, and act according to their own desires, even though they always do what the author has planned.
    - His plan includes motives and desires by which they act.
  - But there is one huge difference in an author and in God...
    - The writer is only a man and he is limited—he can only make his characters appear in a story.
    - God, on the other hand, is not limited—

- He has the ability to make men and women each with their own motives and lives who live and act as free agents,
  - yet who always do precisely what He has planned.
  - God is big enough to do this!
    - We can't take it all into our little brains, but just think of all that is at His disposal who has an infinite mind!
    - He knows the effect that a little adjustment to your DNA would have on your whole life—he knows all the possibilities!
    - He knows the change that would come if the man who would have destroyed the world misses one meeting that would have set him toward that mission.
      - The thing is so much bigger than what I can illustrate because there are infinite options open to God as to who He shall make and what they will experience, and all these are tied together with all the other options for all His other creatures as well as possible creatures!
- Now you know why Paul says what he says in Romans 11 verses 33-35!
  - **Rom 11:33-35: Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable *are* His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?**
  - How foolish it is for us to try to counsel God!
    - We cannot see all the possibilities and purposes of His intricately woven plan.
    - But we can know that everything is of Him and comes through Him.

### **III. Thirdly, all things are “to Him”**

- A. This means that everything is for God's purposes—that is its ultimate final purpose.
1. This is why the verse goes on to say, “to whom be glory forever.”
    - God does things for His own glory—that is, to demonstrate His glory to His creatures.
      - a. That is the reason He saves sinners
        - We have recently studied Eph. 1:3-14 in the mornings...
        - Remember how many times it says “to the praise of His glory,” and “according to His will.”

- Listen as I read it to you...
  - Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, **according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace**, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, **according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself**, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined **according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will**, that we who first trusted in Christ should be **to the praise of His glory**. In Him you also *trusted*, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, **to the praise of His glory**.
  - Clearly, there is one reason that God has saved us—for the praise of His glory.
- b. It is also for His glory that He made the wicked
  - Pr 16:4 says:
    - **The LORD has made all for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom.**
    - He will at last be glorified when He destroys them...
- c. Romans 9, the context in which Romans 11 occurs, ties together God’s purpose for the redeemed and the reprobate.
  - It expresses that it is for the demonstration of His glory that God both saves and condemns:
  - **Romans 9:14-24: What shall we say then? *Is there* unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” So then *it is* not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.” Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed *it*, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and**

another for dishonor? *What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?*

- We will look at this in detail next week, but for now I just want you to see that it is so...

2. God's glory is the reason that the world goes around, the reason you are here, the reason you know the people you know and do the things you do.

- The reason one is saved and another is hardened...
- He will be glorified no matter what anyone thinks about it!
- He does everything for the demonstration of His glory, and no one ought to apologize for it!
  - God has declared it!

3. But does this not make God selfish?

- No, not at all, not in the sense that a puny little man is selfish when he sets himself at the centre of the world and judges everything by how it affects him!
  - It is entirely different for God because He **is** the centre of the universe—
    - actually, more than the centre—because He transcends it all as the Creator.
  - He is worthy of all glory and it is His creature's greatest benefit and blessing to be able to behold His glory.
    - There is nothing better for us than this!
      - **Ps 16:11 You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand *are* pleasures forevermore.**
    - For God to pursue anything else but His own glory would be to deny Himself (which would be unjust)
      - and to deprive His elect creatures of their greatest blessing (which He will not do because of His love for the elect).

B. When you accept this, it completely changes the way you look at the world.

1. Now when some blessing comes your way,

- you understand that it was decreed by God...
- your goal is to praise God for it and with it—to give Him the glory.

- For example, if He gives you a wonderful job, then you seek to give Him thanks for it, to do your work in a way that honours Him, etc.
    - And if He gives you a nasty job, you see that your purpose in it is to give glory to Him in how you respond to the trouble—to live for His honour and show forth His praise...
    - As Paul says in Romans 5, we glory in tribulation because we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.
  - When your perspective is that everything is for God,
    - there are no more real problems—only opportunities to give glory to God.
    - Sure, there are great difficulties and hardships, but there is no more despair because everything is **to the LORD**.
    - All things are **to Him**.
2. The problem we always struggle with is that we think everything should be for us.
- Our struggle with that flows out of the very heart of original sin.
    - We want to be like God—we want everything to cater to us.
    - We are not content for everything to be for God’s glory.
3. This goes back to the first question in the catechism—What is your chief end?
- a. You are out of harmony with the whole creation and what God is doing here if your primary purpose is something other than seeking to give glory to God...
- You are trying to swim against the current of God’s purpose and decree, and you will not prevail.
    - There is your little tiny soul in the huge river of God, supported by the very river you are trying to resist.
  - All your plans will come to naught
    - **Pr 19:21: There are many plans in a man’s heart, nevertheless the LORD’S counsel—that will stand.**
    - **Ps 33:10-11: The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations.**
    - Death puts a sure end to them all:
      - **Psalm 146:3-4: Do not put your trust in princes, *nor* in a son of man, in whom *there is* no help. His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his plans perish.**

- b. But if your chief desire is to glorify God and to behold His glory, then you will not be disappointed.
- The Lord Jesus will be revealed in all His glory at the last day...
  - As we saw this morning, this is Jesus' will for us, and it will be done.
    - **Joh 17:24** “Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.”
  - He will come and we will see His glory.
    - 2 Thes 1:9-10 speaks of the time: “when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe,”

So now we come back to the original question:

- Why are things as they are?
- Why were you born when you were, why is the world as it is?
- Why does the hippopotamus have such a big mouth?

The answer:

**Romans 11:36: Of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever, Amen.**

- It is all what He decreed.