

The Doctrine of Decrees: What the Bible Says about God's Plans

Throughout our discussions, we are examining the world's natural relation to God, as seen in his eternal plan, creation, preservation, and providence. We will study God's personal and intelligent creatures: angels, Satan, demons, and humans. The logical beginning to any discussion of God's relation to the universe, is a study of God's eternal purpose and plan. How does what we *are* relate to what God *intends us to be*? Or, how does the created universe relate to God's decrees concerning this universe?

Introductory Considerations

1. What do we mean when we speak of the "eternal decrees" of God?

- The traditional definition

"The decree of God is his eternal purpose according to the counsel of his will whereby for his own glory he has foreordained whatever comes to pass" (Westminster Shorter Catechism).

- Simple definition

"God's 'decrees' are his decisions concerning all things outside himself." And the simple implication is that he has decided the course and outcome of all events.

- Statements of Scripture which support this definition:

-- Isaiah 14:26-2

-- Isaiah 46:10-11

-- Daniel 4:35

-- Ephesians 1:11 – "We have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to his purpose who works all things after the counsel of his will."

- The logic which demands this definition: Bible prophecy

In order to predict future events, God must have sealed the order of those events as he saw and decreed them to be.

2. What does the Bible say are the distinctive features of God's decrees?

- The decrees of God are universal
 - He stabilizes the material universe
 - He has set seasons and boundaries of nations
 - He has predetermined the rise and fall of rulers
 - He controls the circumstances of each life
 - He orders the manner of each person's death
 - He decrees the good acts of man
 - He decrees the evil acts of man
 - He foreordains the salvation of sinners
 - He has prearranged the judgment of ungodly men
 - He controls the greatest world events
 - He controls the most trivial circumstances
 - He controls all things
- The decrees of God are unilateral. He and he alone has decided the course of this universe (Psalm 135:6; Ephesians 1:11)
- The decrees of God are unchangeable
 - The Bible teaches this (Psalm 33:11) – “The counsel of the LORD stands forever; the plans of his heart from generation to generation.”
 - God's omniscience requires this. He knows everything. So, once he has decided what to do, there is no need to change plans.
 - God's omnipotence requires this. No person or force can make God change his plans.
 - The reliability of Bible prophecy demands this.
 - Faith requires this. If God's plan was subject to change, there could be no possibility of change in the human heart.
- The decrees of God are for his glory (Revelation 4:11) – “Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created.”

- The decrees of God are two in kind
 - Causative decrees: those decisions whereby he performs actions by himself
 - Permissive decrees: those decisions whereby he allows actions to be performed by his creatures

*Note: This is where we have to draw the line between God's **will** and God's **desire**. God's will refers to his overall plan. Whatever happens – including sin – does so according to his eternal plan. God's desire refers to each individual event, such as Christ's going to the cross. He doesn't desire such things, but they must happen to fulfill his eternal plan.*

3. Are there any widespread objections to this view of God's plan?

- Some believe in a finite God.

But that's contrary to biblical truth. Some people think God doesn't know what will happen next; that he's doing his best to make order of this chaos. But we believe that God has decreed this mess in order to prove that his way is best.

- Some object that this theory contradicts the truth of the free will of man.
 - Others speculate that that God's sovereign will takes into account the will of man and works with it.
 - Still others theorize that the free will of man is a myth; that man is either a slave to sin and self or a slave to Christ (Psalm 14:1-3; Romans 7:14f.; John 8:34; Ephesians 6:6).
- Some complain that if God's decrees are responsible for the present condition of the universe, then that makes God the author of sin.
 - God hates sin (Psalm 5:5).
 - The responsibility of committing sin is placed on man and is always accepted by man. No man can blame God for making him sin (Romans 6:23; James 1:13).
 - God's plan does include an allowance for the presence of sin. It is his plan, and he is big enough to be free from any accusation. If we don't understand how a

holy and Almighty God can allow sin to exist, then that's our problem. We've got to wait for a satisfactory answer when we get to heaven – which raises an essential point: the existence of sin in the universe (along with all of its effects) is merely temporary (Revelation 20:14; 21:4; 22:3).

- Some say the eternal decrees of God make preaching and witnessing unnecessary. After all, if God has already determined everything that is going to happen – including the names of those who will ultimately be saved – then why should we waste our energy in Christian witness?
 - God has commanded us to preach and witness. Whether we understand his command or not, we must obey (Matthew 5:16; 28:19-20).
 - We have no way of knowing in advance who will heed the message of salvation.
 - God has decreed not only the plan of salvation, but also the means through which each person will be saved, including the messenger of the gospel.

4. What is the practical value of knowing about God's plan?

- It gives us confidence that God is in charge after all (Acts 4:23-28).
- It encourages the Christian to keep on working (Philippians 2:12-13).
- It cuts away the arrogance of sinners (2nd Peter 3:3-7, 14-15).
- It exalts God to his proper place (Psalm 29:1-2).
- It brings us to yield our lives to God (Psalm 112:7).

What the Bible Says about Creation

1. The Bible's statements about creation

- The Source of creation
 - The world was created by God
 - Ephesians 3:9
 - Jeremiah 10:12

- John 1:3
- Each Person of the Trinity was involved in creation
 - The Father (1st Corinthians 8:6)
 - The Son (Colossians 1:16-17)
 - The Holy Spirit (Genesis 1:2; Job 26:13)
- The time of creation
 - There was a time when the universe did not exist
 - Psalm 90:2
 - John 17:24
 - Ephesians 1:4
 - The universe came into being at a definite point (Genesis 1:1; John 1:1)
- The nature of creation
 - The present imperfect state of the world is due to the intrusion of sin
 - Genesis 3:16
 - Romans 5:12
 - This present imperfect state is only temporary
 - Romans 8:19-20
- The meaning of creation
 - The universe is a standing revelation of God's existence, power, and glory
 - Psalm 19:1
 - Psalm 96:5
 - Isaiah 40:26
 - The ultimate purpose of the universe is to bring glory to God
 - Isaiah 43:7

- Revelation 4:11

2. The Bible's description of creation ... three basic options:

- Ignore the Bible's statements in favor of evolutionary theory.
- Compromise the Bible's statements to accommodate evolutionary theory.
 - "Genesis is merely a poetic expression of God's sovereignty. It has no intention of relating scientific facts. It is meant only to show us that God had something to do with the process."
 - "The six days are actually ages corresponding to the great periods of prehistory as outlined by geologists and paleontologists."

Thus, the universe began in a formless chaos, and through motion and energy was spread out. As continents emerged from the newly condensed seas, simple forms of vegetative life appeared, then other marine forms, then land animals, and finally man."

- "The six days are literal days, but refer to a six-day period in which God revealed his Word to Moses; or a series of six or seven visions that God gave to Moses on successive days."
- "God created a perfect universe, but because of the rebellion of Satan and his angels, the earth suffered a global catastrophe by water. Such a catastrophe would have had to occur in the timeless eons between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2."
- Embrace the Bible's statements as literally true.
 - See "The Laws of Biblical Interpretation," pages 6-8 of this syllabus
 - An overview of evidence for "recent, sudden creation" as the intended meaning of the Genesis narrative
 - The expression "without form and void" or "unformed and unfilled" is never used in Hebrew grammar to imply "wrecked and ruined" as Gap Theorists would suggest.

- The verb “was” is never used in Hebrew grammar to imply “became” as Gap Theorists would suggest.
- The Hebrew word for “created” is best understood as referring to a sudden, miraculous event.
- The expression, “evening and morning,” denotes the normal cycle of a 24-hour period.
- Although the Hebrew word, *yom* (“day”) has several meanings in Scripture, the numerical adjective attached to the noun – “Day One,” “Day Two,” etc. – is a device used in the Hebrew language to specify a literal, 24-hour day.
- The Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:8-11) – “the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work ... for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth...” -- is predicated on the assumption that the “seventh day” of Exodus 20 equals the “seventh day” of Genesis 2:1-2.

3. The Bible’s status in relation to science

- It’s an oasis for any searching scientist.

There is nothing wrong with true science. Science is the systematic collection of observable data and the presentation of hypotheses based on the data. Since the origins of the universe cannot be observed or duplicated, scientists are left to speculate based on *a priori* assumptions (“reasoning or knowledge that proceeds from theoretical deduction rather than from observation or experience.”)¹ Consequently, both the biblical literalist and the evolutionist must exercise faith in his/her predetermined set of assumptions. Hebrews 11:3 says, “By faith we understand...” And 2nd Peter 3:3-7 implies that the evolutionist is motivated (“willingly ignorant” suggests a determination to ignore the Scriptural statements regarding origins) to remove God as Creator as a means of removing him as Judge.

- It demands obedience from those who read it.

Because God made us, it is therefore his right to dispose of us. And since he has declared that it is his intention to destroy everything in the universe which has been

¹ Bing.com word search

tainted by sin, we'd better take advantage of his gracious offer of salvation through personal faith in Jesus Christ; and we'd better live holy and godly lives while we wait for his return, so that others will sense the truth and come to repentance.

God's Works of Preservation and Providence

1. God's work of preservation

- Defined: "Preservation is God's work of maintaining and protecting the existence of the created universe."
- Outlined
 - God's work in the universe continued after creation
 - Nehemiah 9:6
 - John 5:17
 - God's work of preservation covers the entire universe
 - All natural laws
 - Weather (Jeremiah 51:16)
 - Growth (Psalm 104:14, 30)
 - Day and night (Psalm 104:19-22)
 - Stars (Isaiah 40:26)
 - Man's existence (Acts 17:28; Psalm 66:9)
 - God's work of preservation is accomplished in two ways:
 - Natural law (which he initiated, and which continues to operate in an orderly manner)
 - Intervention (in which God steps into creation and produces something out of the ordinary)
 - Preservation is the work of the Trinity
 - Father (John 5:17)

- Son (Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3)
- Holy Spirit (Psalm 104:30)

- Opposing beliefs
 - Deism: “God created the universe due to a sudden whim, and is now disinterested in its operation.”

 - Continuous creation: “God is not preserving a universe he created, but is continually creating the universe” (the teaching of Descartes, Jonathan Edwards, the Talmud).

- Practical application of this doctrine
 - Don’t worry that nature will destroy us all – God is preserving his universe!
(Genesis 9:8-17)

 - Don’t worry that man will destroy us all – God is preserving his universe!
(2nd Peter 3:7-13)

2. God’s work of providence

- Defined: “Providence is the continuing work of God whereby he controls all things in the universe, thereby certainly bringing about the fulfillment of his wise plan.”

- Outlined
 - What providence includes
 - His visible creations
 - The length of the day (Joshua 10)
 - Animal life (Jonah 1 and 4; Numbers 22)
 - Plant life (Jonah 4)
 - Man’s needs (Matthew 5:45)

 - His invisible creations
 - Angels (Daniel 9:21)
 - Satan (Job 1)

- Man's spirit (1st Corinthians 10:13)
- How providence is accomplished
 - He works through nature (Psalm 148:8; Mark 4:37)
 - He works through miracles (Exodus 12, 14; Acts 2)
 - He works through human beings (Genesis 50:20; Acts 3:17-18)
- How providence relates to the problem of evil
 - Preventive providence (Genesis 20:6)
 - Permissive providence (Acts 14:16; Romans 1:24)
 - Directive providence (Genesis 50:20; Psalm 21:1; 76:10)
 - Limiting providence (Job 1:12; 2nd Thessalonians 2:7)
- How the believer should react to providence
 - With security (Psalm 4:8; Romans 8:28; 2nd Corinthians 2:14)
 - With activity (Philippians 2:13)
 - With patience (Romans 11:33; 1st Corinthians 2:6; Hebrews 11:34-35)

Additional aspects of God's decrees – the doctrines of angels, Satan, demons, and humanity – will be dealt with individually in later modules.

Recommended Reading

Whitcomb, John C. *The Early Earth*. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1972.

Fields, Weston W. "Unformed and Unfilled: A Critique of the Gap Theory of Genesis 1:1,2." Unpublished master's thesis. Winona Lake, IN: Grace Theological Seminary, 1973.

Assignments for the Next Module (“The Doctrine of Man”)

1. Read Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*, chapters 21-23.
2. Answer one or more of the “Questions for Personal Application” at the end of each chapter, and be prepared to share and discuss your answers in class. Or compose a question of your own (which relates to the subject matter in those chapters), research the topic, and be prepared to share your answer with the class.