

CHAPTER 3

OF GOD’S ETERNAL DECREE

God’s eternal, sovereign, all-inclusive plan

“1. 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.”

God has such a plan (Rom 9:15; 11:33; Eph 1:11; Heb 6:17). This plan contains all things and events:

- All things that occur are related to each other. If God controls one, he must control them all.
- The Bible says God controls all things (as Eph 1:11 above).
- He controls “chance” events (1 Kgs 22:34 [compare vv. 20, 23]; Prov 16:33; Matt 10:29-30).
- He controls the free actions of people (Prov 21:1; Eph 2:10; Phil 2:13; cf. King Cyrus).
- He controls even the sinful actions of people (Gen 45:4-8; 50:20; 2 Sam 24:1 [compare 1 Chr 21:1]; Isa 10:5; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28 [compare Matt 17:12]).

But note that God is not the author of sin. The sin arises in the will of the sinner, which is corrupted by his sinful nature, as we see in Gen 50:20. God’s sovereign or decretive will is not to be confused with his revealed or prescriptive will—his commandments. While his prescriptive will forbids sin, his decretive will ordains sin for his own glory. Yet when angels or humans sin, they do so of their own free will and desire—they are responsible and accountable. The Bible says that God cannot originate sin (Jas 1:13-17; 1 John 1:5). Rather, he uses and channels the sin of his creatures into the actions he desires (see Ps 76:10 in most translations).

The “liberty” of second causes means that God does not override the freedom of people when he uses them to cause events for other people. The “contingency” of second causes means that God indeed uses those second causes to bring to pass his desired will.

God's plan not conditioned by "foreseeing"

"2. Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions; yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions."

God know all possibilities (1 Sam 23:11-12; Matt 11:21, 23). Three positions have been taken concerning this knowledge or foreknowledge of God and its relation to his ordaining all things:

1. **Socinian** (Italian uncle Laelius Socinus and nephew Faustus Socinus, lived in late 1500s). This position denies that God can know anything before it takes place. This opinion has been rejected by all orthodox Christians until recently, with the advent of the so-called "openness theology."
2. **Arminian** (not Armenian! Jacobus Arminius, Dutch theologian close to 1600). This position claims that God ordains all things ahead of time, but he only ordains the things that he knows will happen anyway. The final decisions actually rest with humans. This view is held by the Roman Catholic Church, and many Protestant churches, as the Lutheran, Methodist, Nazarene, and Pentecostal churches.
3. **Calvinist** (John Calvin, theologian in France and Switerland, in the 1500s). God foreknows all things because he has ordained all things. The final decisions are made by God, not humans. This view was held also by Martin Luther. Today Presbyterian, Reformed, and many independent and Baptist churches hold this position (some more strongly than others).

God's foreknowledge of his children means his loving them and choosing them before the world began (compare Amos 3:2).

The Bible says that God's decrees are . . .

Sovereign – Dan 4:35; Isa 40:13-14; Rom 9:15-18; Eph 1:5

Certain – Matt 16:21; Luke 22:22; 24:44 [passages concerning the death and resurrection of Christ]

God's decree for our salvation is not based on his foreseeing our faith—seeing ahead of time that we were going to believe anyway (Rom 9:11, 13, 16, 18).

God's decree concerning salvation and condemnation

“3. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.

“4. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.”

Of all the creatures that God has created, only two types are revealed in the Bible as having the capacity for everlasting life: angels and humans. All other creatures return to dust at death, having no soul/spirit (Eccl 3:21).

When the Bible speaks of God’s choosing the elect to inherit eternal life, it uses the word “predestine” (Eph 1:5; Rom 8:29). When it speaks of God’s determining who shall suffer for their sins in hell without being saved, it uses words like “ordain,” “foreordain,” or “appoint”; it does not use the word “predestine” (1 Pet 2:8; Jude 4). Therefore, it is inaccurate to say that we believe “God predestines people to hell.” Rather, he ordains who shall suffer in hell for their sins, but he “predestines” those who shall be saved. This is the biblical terminology.

The Bible teaches these truths (Prov 16:4; Acts 13:48; Rom 9:22-23; Eph 1:4-6; 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Tim 5:21).

Predestination to salvation

“5. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him hereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

“6. As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ; are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.”

All of God’s planning took place before he created the world (Eph 1:4; 2 Tim 1:9).

God chose the elect (“elect” simply means “chosen”) according to his own will and pleasure. His choice was not influenced by what he saw ahead of time that we would do or be like (John 6:37-39; 10:26; 15:16, 19; Rom 9:16; 1 Cor 4:7; Eph 2:8-9; 1 Pet 1:2).

Actually, if God had made his choice on the basis of what we would do or what we would be like, none of us would have been saved. We are all hopelessly lost in sin. None of us

would turn to God for salvation if we were left on our own—a dead man can do nothing to save himself!

Our salvation is to result in God's glory (Rom 9:23-24; Eph 1:5-6).

Just as God has chosen who should be saved, he also has determined how they should be saved. The Bible traces several steps (Rom 8:28-30; Eph 2:10; 2 Thess 2:13):

- Election—chosen by God
- Redemption—purchased by Christ
- Calling—called by the Holy Spirit (regeneration)
- All of these lead to faith, which results in these:
 - Justification
 - Adoption
 - Sanctification
 - Perseverance (1 Pet 1:5)
 - Glorification (final salvation)

No one goes through any of these steps unless God has chosen him first. Hebrews 6:4-6 refers to those who are not truly saved, the ones Jesus compared to the shallow ground where the seed grows quickly, but soon dies (Matt 13:5-6, 20-21).

The only people to experience any of these saving graces are the elect, the ones chosen by God (John 6:65; 10:15, 26; 8:47; 17:9; Rom 8:28; 1 John 2:19).

Foreordination to damnation

“7. The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.”

We must remember that no one has the right to be saved, and God is perfectly free to pass over many and bestow eternal life only on certain ones of his choice.

The Scriptures teach that God has eternally ordained all the ones not elected in Christ to suffer for their sins, and that this judgment on them glorifies God's power and justice (Matt 11:25; Rom 9:18-23; 2 Thess 2:9-12; 1 Pet 2:8).

This particular decree has been called God's decree of reprobation.

Special care for this doctrine

“8. The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation, to all that sincerely obey the Gospel.”

We should be especially careful when speaking of this doctrine, either in personal witnessing or in public teaching or preaching. These truths are easily misunderstood or abused. To accept these doctrines, some people, even genuine and sincere Christians, have to experience a “mental revolution,” a “paradigm shift.” God often grants this through prayer, Scripture study, and patience.

But these doctrines must not be ignored or avoided. They are centrally related to the whole plan of salvation. Besides, they are in God’s Word, and all of his Word is necessary for us.

These doctrines, often called the doctrines of grace, when properly understood, provide great comfort and joy to the Christian, as well as great incentive to serve God aright. Their proper fruits are described in 2 Pet 1:5-10.