

CHAPTER THREE: GOD'S DECREE

The General Decree of All Events

1. From all eternity God decreed all that should happen in time, and this He did freely and unalterably, consulting only His own wise and holy will.

Yet in so doing He does not become in any sense the author of sin, nor does He share responsibility for sin with sinners. Neither, by reason of His decree, is the will of any creature whom He has made violated; nor is the free working of second causes put aside; rather it is established.

In all these matters the divine wisdom appears, as also does God's power and faithfulness in effecting that which He has purposed.

2. God's decree is not based upon His foreknowledge that, under certain conditions, certain happenings will take place, but is independent of all such foreknowledge.

(a) The **universality** of God's decree (paragraph 1).

1. Plainly stated (lines 1-2). God's decree is the plan or purpose He made in eternity concerning everything that should take place. See Catechism Q. 11 and Daniel 4:34, Romans 8:28, Ephesians 1:11. It includes everything:
 - even the sinful acts of men (Genesis 50:20, Acts 2:23)
 - what we call 'chance' (1 Kings 22:28-34, Proverbs 16:33)
 - the small details of our lives (Matthew 10:29-30, James 4:15)
 - all that the most powerful do (Proverbs 21:1, Daniel 2:21)
 - and the final destruction of the wicked (Proverbs 16:4, Romans 9:17)
2. Carefully guarded (lines 3-6). The truth of God's decree must be received because it is taught in the Word of God. There are many things we cannot understand, either because our minds are too small, or because God has chosen not to reveal them to us. We must never put our minds above the Scripture, and we must never make a doctrine mean something that the Bible does not teach. As we receive the teaching about God's decree, there are 2 things it does NOT mean:
 - It does not deny the holiness of God – God is not the author of sin in any sense. He only permits the wicked to perform the sin and then overrules it for His own purpose. For example, He could have prevented Joseph's brothers from selling him into slavery, but He had a purpose in it.
 - It does not deny the responsibility of man – Men are free in the sense we act without being forced from outside. We act according to our own free choice, according to the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves. So Judas freely decided to betray his Master because of his love for money, and perhaps because he found that Jesus was not the type of Messiah he expected. However it is impossible to reconcile in our minds the Decrees of God and human freedom and responsibility. For more, read Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*.
3. Practically applied (lines 7-8). The ability of God to plan everything from the beginning and perfectly to bring it all to pass shows His wisdom, power and faithfulness (see Romans 11:34-36).

(b) The **unconditionality** of God's decree (paragraph 2) – Many people try to teach that God incorporates something into His plan because He knows it is going to happen. But this is impossible. God can only know what will surely happen, and it is God Himself who makes it sure that anything will happen. God knows things will happen because He has decreed them. Note that God revealed future things to the prophets not just because of His foreknowledge, but because of His decree (see Isaiah 46:10, Acts 3:18, 4:27-28, 15:15-18). Anyway, God's decree includes all things, not only the end but also the means to that end (note Acts 27:24 and 31). God had no help, and no pressure was put upon Him, because when He made His decree nothing else existed except Himself (Isaiah 40:13-14, Romans 11:34).

The Specific Decree of Predestination

3. *By His decree, and for the manifestation of His glory, God has predestinated (or foreordained) certain men and angels to eternal life through Jesus Christ, thus revealing His grace. Others, whom He has left to perish in their sins, show the terrors of His justice.*

4. *The angels and men who are the subjects of God's predestination are clearly and irreversibly designated, and their number is unalterably fixed.*

(a) In granting salvation God is selective (paragraph 3). He selects (= elects, predestinates, foreordains) some to be saved. This is for His glory and especially to show the glory of His grace. See Matthew 11:27, John 6:36-39, 17:2,24, Acts 13:48, Romans 8:29-30, Ephesians 1:3-6, 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5, 2 Thessalonians 2:13, 2 Timothy 1:9. Those He does not select (= reprobates) "He has left to perish in their sins", to show "His justice". Read the following passages where both groups are referred to: John 12:37-40, Romans 9:6-24, 1 Peter 2:8-10. Note that it men as *sinners* who are the objects of predestination, so that if any are saved it is God's "grace", but if any are not saved it is God's "justice". Angels are also included in the decree of predestination (1 Timothy 5:21).

(b) God's selection is of individual men and angels and what He has decreed will not be changed (paragraph 4). God's decree does not only cover nations (Israel in Deuteronomy 7:6-8), or the work that God has planned for individuals to do (Paul in Acts 26:16-18), but also the destiny of individuals:

1. Jacob and Esau (Romans 9:10-13)
2. Pharaoh (Romans 9:14-18)
3. Church members at Ephesus (Ephesians 1:4-5)

The Positive Aspect of Predestination Explained: Election

5. *Before the world was made, God's eternal, immutable purpose, which originated in the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, moved Him to choose (or to elect), in Christ, certain of mankind to everlasting glory. Out of His mere free grace and love He predestinated these chosen ones to life, although there was nothing in them to cause him to choose them.*

6. *Not only has God appointed the elect to glory in accordance with the eternal and free purpose of His will, but He has also foreordained the means by which his purpose will be effected. Since His elect are children of Adam and therefore among those ruined by Adam's fall into sin, He willed that they should be redeemed by Christ, and effectually called to faith in Christ. Furthermore, by the working of His Spirit in due season, they are justified, adopted, sanctified, and 'kept by His power through faith unto salvation'. None but the elect partake of any of these great benefits.*

(a) The **gracious basis** of election (paragraph 5). The only reason why anyone is selected is the *grace* of God. It is grace alone that makes the difference between those God ordains to life and those He leaves to die in their sins. This is shown by the following:

1. This was God's purpose "before the world was made", so before we were created, before we had done anything good or bad (Ephesians 1:4, 2 Timothy 1:9).
2. It was "in accordance with the eternal and free purpose of His will" (Romans 9:11,18, Ephesians 1:5).
3. It is a choice "in Christ", dependent upon all He has done for sinners (Ephesians 1:4-5).
4. The cause is specifically given as positively "His mere free grace", and negatively "nothing in them" (Romans 9:11,16, 11:5-6, 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, Galatians 1:15, Ephesians 1:5-6, 2 Timothy 1:9).

(c) The **effectual execution** of election (paragraph 6). God has not only planned that the elect will enter "glory", but He has also planned all the "means" to enable them to arrive there. We must never think that the elect will be finally saved no matter what they do or how they live. No!

1. God has sent *Christ* to redeem the elect from their sins. Therefore, God's purpose in the death of Christ was not to save everyone, but to save the elect (see John 10:11, Ephesians 5:25).
2. God sends His *Spirit* to effectually work in the lives of all the elect. Everyone whom God has elected and for whom Christ died will also believe unto justification, be adopted into God's family, be sanctified (= made holy) and kept faithful in holiness unto the end. Read this wonderful 'golden chain' in Romans 8:29-30!

In salvation we are dependent upon the Father to elect us, the Son to redeem us, and the Spirit to work in us. Note how these 3 different aspects of salvation, as the work of the triune God, are brought together in John 6:37, Acts 13:48, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, 1 Peter 1:2.

The Necessity for Carefully Handling the Doctrine

7. The high mystery of predestination needs to be handled with special prudence and caution, so that men, being directed to the will of God revealed in His Word and obeying the same, may become assured of their eternal election through the certainty of their effectual calling. By this means predestination will promote the praise of God, and reverential awe and wonder. It will encourage humility and diligence, and bring much comfort to all who sincerely obey the gospel.

(a) Why the doctrine needs to be carefully handled (lines 1-2). God's decrees are secret to us and we must not try to pry into them or base our duty upon them (Deuteronomy 29:29). The following wrong conclusions have sometimes been drawn from the doctrine of God's decrees:

1. God is capricious = there is no good reason why God does one thing and not another. But the fact that we do not know the reason does not mean that God does not have a good reason. For example, Joseph did not know at the beginning why his brothers sold him into slavery, but he came to see later there was a good reason (Genesis 50:20).
2. There can be no true human responsibility. Logically it may seem that God's decrees and human responsibility cannot exist together. But in the Bible they belong together. For example, Jesus died "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God", yet those who killed Him are called "lawless" (Acts 2:23 and see Luke 22:22).
3. The decree will stop a person from being saved even if they want to be saved. This is untrue, because no sinner wants to be saved. If anyone comes to Christ = believes, then that is the evidence that he has been chosen. In Antioch it was "as many as were appointed to eternal" who "believed", no more and no less (Acts 13:48, and John 6:37).

(b) How you can be assured you are elect (lines 3-4). It is being sure of your "effectual calling". So Paul was sure the Thessalonians were chosen because when the gospel came to them it came with power and changed their lives (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5). Peter tells his readers that they can be sure of their election and calling by bearing godly fruit in their lives (2 Peter 1:5-10). Conclusion: God's secret election is revealed in two things, a true conversion and a godly Christian life.

(c) What benefits the doctrine of the decrees brings to us (lines 5-7). The Confession mentions at least 4 very practical things.:

1. "Praise of God", especially of His grace as the real cause of our salvation (Ephesians 1:3-6). We have received the opposite of what we deserve because of our sins.
2. "Humility" before God, because it is God who controls everything, and I have contributed nothing at all to my salvation (Romans 9:6-24).
3. "Diligence" in serving the Lord because His purposes shall surely come to pass. Paul was assured that "I have many people in this city who are my people" and so he stayed a year and 6 months (Acts 18:10-11). A true understanding of the decrees does not lead to fatalism or carelessness, but just the opposite.
4. "Comfort", because God is in control of every circumstance for my good (Romans 8:28).