

Lesson 5

Part One – Introduction to Systematic Theology

- I. Introduction
 - a. What is Systematic Theology?
 - b. What is the relation between Systematic Theology and Hermeneutics?
 - c. Why is it important to study the Bible systematically?

Part Two – Theology Proper - Beginning at the Beginning

- I. Introduction to the One True God
 - a. Arguments for the existence of God
 - b. Why only one God
- II. The Nature of God
 - a. God's incommunicable perfections (attributes)
 - b. God's *communicable* attributes
 - i. Spirituality
 - ii. Intellect (includes knowledge, wisdom, and veracity)
 - iii. Morality (includes goodness, love, grace, mercy and longsuffering)
 - iv. Holiness
 - v. Righteousness
 - vi. Justice
 - c. God as Trinity
 - i. Definition
 - ii. Misinterpretations/Misunderstandings
 - iii. Explanation
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- III. The Decree of God
 - a. Definition

The decree of God has been established in eternity past and has reference to God's sovereign control over every realm and over all events. The decree is reflected in **Ephesians 1:11** in that He "*works all things after the counsel of His will.*" The response to question 7 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism states: "*The decree of God is His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.*" Ultimately, man is faced with only two options when it comes to understanding the decree of God.

Either God is sovereign and has absolute control over the world and universe or God does **not** have sovereign control, and the world and universe carry on in defiance of His holy will (which would leave random chance in control). Belief in the theory of evolution is a demonstration of the latter belief. The evolutionist insists that all things came into being and are now configured the way they are (to include irreducible complexity) on the basis of purely random chance.

So, simply stated, the decree of God is that which He has determined, from eternity past, will happen and nothing is capable of thwarting, frustrating, or changing it.

b. Characteristics of God's Decree. God's decree is...

Singular. *God's decree is **singular**, encompasses all things, and is Immutable.* Note again that **Ephesians 1:11** emphasizes that "*all things*" are brought to pass by God's decree. It is critically important that we acknowledge this. Why? Because it supports the immutability and resoluteness of God Himself. God doesn't change His mind; He doesn't change His plan; He doesn't alter or supplement His plan (i.e. He is not reactive). Listen to the Westminster Confession of Faith on this point:

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. 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.

Eternal. *God's decree was established in eternity past but is manifested in time.* In **Ephesians 1:4**, we're told that the believer was chosen by God in eternity past. The believer's salvation is based 100% in God's choice before time began. In **2 Timothy 1:9**, it is emphasized that we are saved according to God's own purpose. The word "*purpose*" (*prothesin*) emphasizes the resolve or decision of God to call and save the believer. Likewise, the decision for Christ to take on humanity and shed His blood for His elect was made "before the foundation of the world" (**1 Peter 1:20**). In **Acts 2:23** we're told that Jesus was "*delivered over by the predetermined **plan** (boule) and foreknowledge of God.*"

Wise. *The decree reflects the wisdom of a God who knows what is best for His children.* God's decree, according to passages such as **Psalms 104:24** and **Proverbs 3:19**, is intended to be for our good and His glory.

Dual in aspect. *The decree is often seen as having two aspects.* The first of these is known as the *directive* or “*decretive*” will of God. This simply states that God has in fact decreed *inviolably* and *unalterably* whatever shall come to pass. When God, for example, decreed our salvation in eternity past, it was unalterably and inviolably established. The course of history itself moves along according to the divine decree of God. It cannot deviate from the course upon which God has set it.

Discussion: What would be the “*ripple effect*” if God’s decree was in fact changeable or negotiable? Short answer? Chaos and uncertainty.

The second aspect of God’s decree is known as His *permissive* or *prescriptive* will. This can be understood in a couple of ways. First of all, when we speak of God’s permissive will we recognize that there are certain examples of God’s will in Scripture that simply aren’t decretive in nature. The Decalogue or the Ten Commandments are a good example of this. When God says, “*Thou shalt not murder,*” for example, is this a decree? No. How do we know? Because people are murdering one another every day. If God meant this (or any of the other commandments) as being “*decretive,*” guess what? No one would ever do those things because God would have decreed that they would not be done. If, however, we understand this in the *permissive* or *prescriptive* sense, we understand perfectly that God is expressing His will in an entirely different way.

The way most theologians speak of God’s *permissive* will, however, is in terms of God’s use of secondary causes. Even though God has determined all things, He may actively bring them about Himself, or He may bring them about through secondary causality. Sinful acts, for example, don’t frustrate the plan of God, but neither does God Himself do those sinful acts. The sinful acts are within the scope of God’s decree and are part of His eternal plan and purpose, but man is nonetheless responsible for those acts. As Louis Berkhof points out, “*a distinction must be made between the decree and its execution.*”

The question that often arises from this aspect of God’s decree is “*Did God foreordain evil or does He simply ‘permit’ or ‘allow’ it to happen?*” Well, to say that God merely *allows* or *permits* things (including sin) is to imply that there is something he doesn’t know or isn’t in charge of; something He didn’t directly decree to come to pass. We know this can’t be the case so we must maintain that God decreed the evil that happens in this world.

According to the response to question 8 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, God’s eternal plan and purpose extends itself to all His creatures and all their actions “*even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that **not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined***”

with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of [all the sins of angels and men], in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends.”

Now, please understand, this is not to say that God DOES the evil acts because He doesn't. There is a difference between His decreeing and His doing.

A perfect example of this is the crucifixion of Christ, isn't it? According to **Acts 2:23**, Christ was:

“...delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, [and yet] nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.”

Does this make you uncomfortable? Don't worry about it, the *theodicy* has been debated for centuries and we're no closer to resolving the debate today than we were a thousand years ago. By way of clarification, however, I would like to discuss this briefly using some of Dr. Downing's notes on the subject.

[Read from Downing's work on the Theodicy]

Not fatalistic. *The decree of God cannot be viewed as fatalistic.* It is important that we distinguish the decree of God from fatalism. **God's decree can't be fatalistic because it involves, not merely the end but the means by which the end is achieved.** For example, the decree of God involves electing certain individuals to salvation and yet no one is saved apart from evangelism. God often uses human instrumentality to bring about His decree and, at the same time, we cannot view ourselves as robots or automatons in the process.

This tension is what is known as an *“antinomy.”* Antinomies occur when there is an apparent contradiction between two things that are equally true but they simply cannot be resolved with the human mind. The tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility is an antinomy.

c. Order of God's Decrees

Much ink has been wasted over the years in attempting to determine when God decreed what He did. The bulk of this argument is made in connection with what theologians call *“lapsarianism.”* Lapsarianism seeks to answer the question of the order with God actually ordained (or decided; in His mind) that the fall and election unto salvation would take place. We're not going to expend a great deal of time on this because Scripture really doesn't specifically address it. However, just so you know (because you will hear these terms

eventually), there are basically two camps within the lapsarian debate. First are the *Supralapsarians* or “*Supralaps*” as they prefer to be called. Supralapsarians (as the name indicates (supra = above)) insist that, immediately after creation, God first elected some unto salvation and then came the fall. This position is countered by the *Infralapsarians* who insist that God first ordained the fall and then elected some unto salvation.

I tend to agree with Herman Bavinck who argued that, since whatever happened in the mind of God happened in a timeless eternity, the entire argument is pointless.