

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 7: THE ETERNAL DECREES OF GOD

Lesson 23

The Decrees of God — What God Has Purposed from Eternity

The Sovereign Plan That Governs All Things

Key Texts: Ephesians 1:4–5, 11; Acts 2:23; Romans 9:11; Isaiah 46:10

Before the Foundation of the World

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Series Verse
<i>“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?”</i>
Romans 11:33–34, NASB 1995

Introduction

Before the first ray of light ever pierced the primordial darkness, before the waters were gathered and the dry land appeared, before any creature drew its first breath or lifted its first voice in praise, God purposed. In the eternal counsel of His own will, the triune God determined all that would come to pass: the creation of the world, the ordering of history, the fall and redemption of man, the gathering of the elect, the judgment of the wicked, the consummation of all things in the new heavens and the new earth. Nothing that unfolds in time was not first decreed in eternity. Nothing that occurs in history was not first purposed in the mind of the God who inhabits eternity and for whom a thousand years are as a watch in the night.

This is the doctrine of the eternal decrees of God, and it is, in many respects, the doctrine that gives the whole of Theology Proper its architectonic coherence. The attributes of God we have studied, His sovereignty, His omniscience, His immutability, His wisdom, His goodness, all converge in the doctrine of the decrees. For the decrees are nothing other than the expression, in the mode of eternal purposing, of who God is: a God of absolute sovereignty who ordains whatsoever comes to pass; of infinite wisdom who orders all things according to the most perfect ends by the most perfect means; of immutable constancy whose purposes cannot be thwarted; and of incomprehensible goodness who works all things together for the good of those He has loved from before the foundation of the world.

This lesson opens Unit 7 by establishing the foundations of the doctrine of the divine decrees: what the decrees are, what their characteristics are, how they relate to the two wills of God, how they interact with human freedom and responsibility, and what pastoral comfort flows from resting in the sovereignty of a God whose eternal purposes cannot fail. Lesson 24 will then press into the most contested dimension of the decrees, predestination, election, and reprobation. In this lesson, we lay the doctrinal groundwork that makes those more specific questions intelligible.

I. The Decrees of God Defined

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, in one of the most carefully crafted sentences in all of Reformed confessional literature, defines the decrees as follows: “The decrees of God are His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass” (WSC, Q. 7). Every phrase of this definition carries freight, and unpacking it carefully will serve us well.

“His eternal purpose”, The decrees are not temporal decisions made by God in response to creaturely choices or historical developments. They are eternal, existing in God’s mind before creation, before time, before any creature existed. God does not deliberate in time; He purposed in eternity. The entire sweep of history, from creation to consummation, was known and determined by God in the eternal moment of His sovereign counsel.

“According to the counsel of His will”, The decrees originate in God alone. He does not take counsel from angels, from men, from foreseen human choices, or from any external

source. “Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him?” (Isaiah 40:13, NASB 1995). The decrees are the free, sovereign, self-determined purposes of God, rooted in nothing outside Himself, conditioned by nothing external to His own will and wisdom.

“For His own glory”, The ultimate end of all that God has decreed is the display and magnification of His own glory. This is not an expression of divine narcissism; it is the most morally appropriate possible ultimate end for an infinitely perfect Being. For God to aim at anything less than His own glory would be to aim at something inferior to Himself, which would be neither wise nor just. As Jonathan Edwards argued with characteristic penetrating clarity, God’s seeking His own glory and the creature’s highest good are not competing ends but converging ones: the creature’s ultimate happiness is found in the knowledge, enjoyment, and glorification of God Himself.

“Has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass”, The scope of the decrees is comprehensive and without exception. Not some things, not most things, but all things that come to pass have been foreordained by God. This includes not only the broad outlines of redemptive history but the particular details of individual lives, the rise and fall of nations, the casting of lots, the flight of sparrows, and the numbering of hairs (Proverbs 16:33; Matthew 10:29–30; Acts 17:26). The God who works “all things after the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11, NASB 1995) is not a God who works most things, or the important things, while leaving the rest to chance or creaturely self-determination. He works all things.

“...also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.”

Ephesians 1:11, NASB 1995

II. The Characteristics of the Divine Decrees

The Scriptures, taken together, present a portrait of the divine decrees with a number of distinguishing characteristics. These are not merely academic attributes; they are the pastoral ground on which the people of God stand when the storms of life threaten to sweep them away. Understanding what the decrees are like is the first step toward trusting the God who has made them.

Characteristic	Explanation
Eternal	The decrees were made before time began, in the eternal counsel of God. There was no moment when they did not exist, no deliberation in time that preceded them. “Purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord before the ages” (Ephesians 3:11). God does not revise His decrees in light of creaturely events; His purposes are fixed from before the foundation of the world.
Wise	The decrees are not arbitrary but ordered by infinite wisdom. God does not decree randomly or thoughtlessly; He foreordains all things

	according to the most perfect ends by the most perfect means. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Romans 11:33). The wisdom behind the decrees exceeds all creaturely comprehension, but it is wisdom, not chaos.
Free	The decrees are the expression of God’s sovereign freedom. He was under no external compulsion or necessity to decree what He decreed. He was not constrained by creaturely choices He foresaw, by the demands of any external moral order, or by the pressure of any being outside Himself. The decrees arise from the free, sovereign, self-determined will of God alone.
Unconditional	The decrees do not depend for their content or their efficacy on creaturely conditions. God does not decree one thing on the condition that creatures choose another. The decrees are absolute, they are what God has purposed, not what God has purposed if certain creaturely conditions are met. This is especially important for the decree of election, which is not conditioned on foreseen faith but is the sovereign, unconditioned choice of God.
Immutable	The decrees do not change. Because God Himself is immutable, His purposes are equally immutable: “The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation” (Psalm 33:11, NASB 1995). No creaturely rebellion, no historical contingency, no satanic opposition can alter, frustrate, or nullify what God has purposed from eternity. “My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure” (Isaiah 46:10, NASB 1995).
Comprehensive	The decrees encompass all things without exception, from the greatest events of redemptive history to the most minute particulars of individual lives. Not a sparrow falls apart from the Father’s decree; not a hair falls from a head outside His sovereign governance. The comprehensive scope of the decrees is the theological ground of the believer’s confidence that “God causes all things to work together for good” (Romans 8:28, NASB 1995).
Efficacious	The decrees are not merely God’s wishes or intentions; they are God’s sovereign determinations, and what God has determined will come to pass. “The Lord of hosts has sworn saying, ‘Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand’” (Isaiah 14:24, NASB 1995). The decrees of God are not frustrated by creaturely resistance; they are accomplished through secondary causes, including the free choices of moral creatures, without coercion and without failure.

III. The Two Wills of God: Decretive and Preceptive

One of the most important and most frequently misunderstood distinctions in the doctrine of the decrees is the distinction between what the Reformed tradition calls God's decretive will and His preceptive will. Without this distinction, the doctrine of the decrees generates apparent contradictions that are, in fact, resolvable, and its absence has led to enormous confusion in popular Christian thinking about God, evil, and human responsibility.

A. The Decretive Will

God's decretive will, also called His sovereign will, His will of decree, or His efficacious will, is His eternal purpose by which He foreordains whatsoever comes to pass. The decretive will is always accomplished: nothing God has decreed fails to occur. When the cross of Christ is described as happening "by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23, NASB 1995), this is the language of God's decretive will. When the wicked schemes of Herod, Pilate, and the Jewish leaders are said to have accomplished "whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur" (Acts 4:28, NASB 1995), this is God's decretive will being accomplished through secondary causes, including sinful human choices, without God being the author of the sin.

The decretive will is not always revealed to us in advance. We discover what God has decreed by observing what occurs. The secret things belong to the Lord our God (Deuteronomy 29:29). We cannot read the decretive will of God from circumstances with certainty; we can only receive it with trust as the providence of the God who works all things after the counsel of His will.

B. The Preceptive Will

God's preceptive will, also called His revealed will, His moral will, or His will of command, is His revealed moral standard, expressed in Scripture's commands and prohibitions, by which He calls His creatures to obedience. The preceptive will is not always accomplished, because God permits His creatures to disobey His commands. When Israel worships the golden calf in Exodus 32, they are violating God's preceptive will, the command to have no other gods before Him. When Judas betrays Christ, he is violating God's preceptive will, "Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!" (Matthew 26:24, NASB 1995). Yet both events are within God's decretive will, they occur as part of God's sovereign plan, even as they constitute genuine moral violations for which the creatures involved bear full responsibility.

The distinction between the two wills is not a contradiction within the divine being. God is not divided against Himself. Rather, it reflects the fact that God relates to His creatures in two distinguishable modes: as their sovereign Ruler whose purposes govern all things, and as their moral Lawgiver whose commands call them to righteousness. These two modes of the divine will operate simultaneously, without conflict, and without either canceling the other.

C. The Critical Practical Implication

This distinction has immediate and important practical implications. It means that when evil occurs, when the innocent suffer, when wickedness seems to triumph, when the worst of human crimes is perpetrated, we may say simultaneously: this violates God's preceptive will (it is genuinely evil, morally condemned, and not what God commands);

and it is within God's decretive will (it occurs by divine permission and sovereign governance, and God is working through it for purposes beyond our comprehension). This is not moral relativism or indifference to evil; it is the theological framework within which Joseph can say to his wicked brothers: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20, NASB 1995).

"This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." | "...to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur."

Acts 2:23; Acts 4:27–28, NASB 1995

IV. The Decree of Election Within the Broader Decree

The Westminster Catechism's definition of the decrees speaks of God foreordaining "whatsoever comes to pass", and this includes, most personally and most urgently for the men and women who will stand before God in judgment, the decree of election. Election is not the totality of the divine decrees, but it is the most personally weighty dimension of them, the one that touches most directly on the question of each individual's eternal destiny.

The decree of election is God's eternal, unconditional choice of certain individuals to salvation before the foundation of the world. Paul states this with breathtaking directness in Ephesians 1:4–5: "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will" (NASB 1995). The chosen are chosen "in Him", that is, in union with Christ, who is Himself the Elect One; they are chosen "before the foundation of the world", that is, before any creaturely act or condition existed to condition the choice; and they are chosen "according to the kind intention of His will", that is, the sole ground of election is the sovereign, gracious pleasure of God, not any foreseen quality or choice of the elect themselves.

Romans 9:11 makes the unconditioned character of election unmistakably clear: "for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls" (NASB 1995). The election of Jacob over Esau was made before either had done anything, precisely to demonstrate that election rests on God's sovereign choice, not on human merit, foreseen works, or anticipated faith. This will be developed at length in Lesson 24; here we note simply that election is the most specific and most personally weighty of the divine decrees, and it is an expression of pure, sovereign, unmerited grace.

V. The Lapsarian Question: The Logical Order of the Decrees

Within the Reformed tradition, a significant and at times heated debate has centered on the question of the logical order of the divine decrees: in what logical sequence should we arrange God's eternal purposes regarding the creation of man, the permission of the fall, and the election and reprobation of individual persons? This debate, known as the lapsarian controversy, has produced two main positions: supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism.

A. Supralapsarianism

The supralapsarian position (from the Latin *supra*, “above,” and *lapsus*, “fall”) holds that in the logical order of the divine decrees, the decree of election and reprobation precedes the decree to permit the fall. On this view, the logical order runs roughly as follows: (1) God decrees to elect some and reprobate others for His own glory; (2) God decrees to create those elect and reprobate persons; (3) God decrees to permit the fall, by which both the guilt of the reprobate and the need for redemption of the elect are established; (4) God decrees to provide redemption for the elect in Christ; (5) God decrees to call, justify, and glorify the elect through the Spirit.

The strength of the supralapsarian position lies in its emphasis on the absolute sovereignty and priority of the elective decree: God’s ultimate purpose is the display of His glory in both mercy and justice, and this purpose logically precedes all His other decrees. The weakness, and it is a serious one, is that it appears to make the object of the decree of election and reprobation not yet created, not yet fallen human beings, which strains both logic and pastoral sensibility. It seems to elect and reprobate a non-entity. Supralapsarianism has been associated with theologians such as Theodore Beza, William Perkins, and Francis Gomarus.

B. Infralapsarianism

The infralapsarian position (from the Latin *infra*, “below,” and *lapsus*, “fall”) holds that in the logical order of the divine decrees, the decree of election and reprobation follows the decree to permit the fall. On this view, the logical order runs roughly as follows: (1) God decrees to create human beings; (2) God decrees to permit the fall; (3) God decrees to elect some from the fallen mass of humanity for salvation in Christ; (4) God decrees to pass over the rest, leaving them in their sin and appointing them to just condemnation; (5) God decrees to provide redemption for the elect in Christ; (6) God decrees to call and glorify the elect through the Spirit.

The strength of infralapsarianism is that it conceives of the objects of election and reprobation as fallen human beings, sinners who have forfeited any claim on God’s mercy, which is more consistent with the biblical presentation of election as an act of grace toward the guilty and reprobation as the just consequence of sin. The Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 3) and the London Baptist Confession of 1689 (Chapter 3) are generally understood to be infralapsarian in their formulation, though they deliberately avoid choosing between the two positions explicitly. The great majority of Reformed theologians, Calvin himself appears infralapsarian, as do Turretin, Owen, and the broader Westminster tradition, have taken the infralapsarian position.

C. The Limits of the Debate

It is important to note that both positions are within the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy, and both affirm the full sovereignty of God in election and reprobation. The debate is about the logical order of the eternal decrees, not about whether God is sovereign. Both supralapsarians and infralapsarians confess that God’s decrees are eternal, unconditional, and comprehensive; they disagree only about their logical arrangement.

It is equally important to note that the debate is about logical, not temporal, order. In the eternal mind of God, there is no before and after; the decrees are one simple eternal act of the divine will. The question of logical ordering is a question about the conceptual relationships among the various elements of that one eternal act, a question of systematic theology, not of chronology. And on such questions, where Scripture does not explicitly adjudicate, the church has wisely allowed latitude within its confessional boundaries.

“just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.”

Ephesians 1:4–5, NASB 1995

VI. The Decrees and Human Freedom: Compatibilism

The doctrine of the divine decrees raises, for every thoughtful person who encounters it, an urgent and unavoidable question: if God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, how can human beings be genuinely free, genuinely responsible, and genuinely culpable for their choices? If Judas’s betrayal of Christ was predestined from eternity, how can Judas bear the moral weight our Lord’s “woe” assigns to him? If Pharaoh’s hardness of heart was sovereignly ordained, how can Paul hold him accountable in Romans 9? These are not trivial questions, and the Reformed tradition has not answered them with silence or deflection.

A. The Compatibilist Position

The answer that Scripture gives, and that the Reformed tradition has consistently developed under the name of compatibilism, is this: divine sovereignty and human freedom, rightly understood, are compatible. They are not competing realities that must be balanced against each other; they are simultaneous and mutually consistent dimensions of the same divine work. God’s sovereign foreordination of all things does not eliminate human freedom; it is exercised through human freedom. The free choices of moral creatures are the secondary causes through which God’s eternal purposes are accomplished.

Compatibilism defines human freedom not as the power to act independently of God’s sovereign decree, what philosophers call libertarian free will, but as the power to act according to one’s own desires, inclinations, and nature without external coercion. A person acts freely when he does what he wants to do, even if what he wants to do has been sovereignly ordained by God. Judas betrayed Christ freely, he acted according to his own greed, his own disillusionment, his own desire for the thirty pieces of silver. His choice was genuinely his own. And yet it was simultaneously foreordained by God to accomplish the redemption of the world. The two truths coexist without contradiction.

B. The Biblical Witness to Both Truths

The clearest single passage in all of Scripture for the compatibility of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is Acts 2:23: “this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (NASB 1995). In a single sentence, the apostle Peter affirms both the

absolute sovereignty of God in the death of Christ (“delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God”) and the full moral culpability of those who crucified Him (“you nailed to a cross... and put Him to death”). He does not resolve the tension by softening one truth in favor of the other; he simply states both with equal force.

The same pattern appears throughout Scripture. Joseph’s brothers acted freely and wickedly when they sold him into slavery; God meant it for good (Genesis 50:20). Assyria acts as the instrument of God’s judgment on Israel; yet Assyria is held accountable for its arrogance and cruelty (Isaiah 10:5–15). The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is sovereignly ordained by God (Exodus 4:21); yet Pharaoh is held fully responsible for his own stubborn refusal (Exodus 8:15). Scripture does not resolve this mystery by explaining the mechanics of how divine sovereignty and human freedom interact at the level of causation; it simply affirms both realities and calls us to hold them together in humble faith.

C. What Compatibilism Does Not Mean

Compatibilism does not mean that God coerces human choices. The Reformed tradition has consistently and emphatically insisted that God never moves His creatures to sinful acts by compulsion. He governs the free choices of creatures through His providential ordering of their natures, their circumstances, their desires, and their inclinations, but always through their own freedom, never by overriding it. The sinner who rejects the gospel does so freely; the elect who embrace it do so freely. The freedom is real in both cases; the sovereignty of God encompasses both without negating either.

Compatibilism also does not mean that God is the author of sin. The Reformed confessions are explicit and unanimous on this point. The Westminster Confession of Faith states: “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” (WCF 3.1). God permits sin; He ordains that it will occur; He governs its occurrence for His purposes. But He is never its efficient cause, never its moral author, and never in any way tainted by it. The distinction is real, and its preservation is essential to the integrity of the doctrine.

VII. The Pastoral Comfort of the Eternal Decrees

Having established the theological framework of the doctrine of the decrees with the precision that Scripture and the confessional tradition require, we must now ask the question that every pastor knows is the most urgent one: what difference does this make? What does it mean, in the daily life of a believer navigating grief, uncertainty, suffering, and the fear of an unknown future, to confess that God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass?

A. Nothing Is Accidental

The first and most foundational pastoral comfort of the doctrine of the decrees is this: nothing that happens to you is accidental. Not the diagnosis, not the loss, not the betrayal, not the failure, not the death. Every event that has touched your life has passed through

the sovereign hands of the God who purposed it in eternity for reasons that are always wise, always good, and always oriented toward your ultimate blessing and His ultimate glory.

This is not a comfortable platitude; it is a structurally demanding theological claim. It means that the God who could have decreed otherwise chose to decree this, this grief, this trial, this season of darkness, and He chose it with infinite wisdom and unfailing love. The believer who has grasped the doctrine of the decrees does not confront suffering with the hollow comfort of “everything happens for a reason”, a cliché that may mean nothing at all. He confronts it with the theologically grounded conviction that everything happens because the all-wise, all-powerful, all-loving God of the universe has decreed it for purposes that he may not yet be able to see but that he has every reason to trust.

B. The Certainty of the Promises

Because the divine decrees are immutable, because God’s purposes cannot be thwarted and His counsel cannot be frustrated, every promise God has made to His people rests on an unshakeable foundation. The promise of justification (Romans 5:1), of adoption (Ephesians 1:5), of preservation (John 10:28–29), of glorification (Romans 8:30), of the resurrection of the body (1 Corinthians 15:20–23), of the new heavens and the new earth (Revelation 21:1–5), all of these promises are as certain as the eternal decree of the God who made them. They cannot be undone by satanic opposition, by creaturely failure, or by the vicissitudes of history. God has decreed them, and what God has decreed comes to pass.

Paul’s great golden chain of Romans 8:29–30 is the most eloquent expression of this certainty in all of Scripture: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (NASB 1995). The chain is unbreakable at every link. Not one of the foreknown fails to be predestined; not one of the predestined fails to be called; not one of the called fails to be justified; not one of the justified fails to be glorified. The certainty of glorification rests on the certainty of the eternal decree, and the certainty of the eternal decree rests on the immutability of the God who made it.

C. The Doxological Response

The doctrine of the decrees does not terminate in comfort alone; it terminates, like all genuine Theology Proper, in worship. When Paul reaches the summit of his exposition of the divine decrees in Romans 9–11, having worked through the hardest questions of election, reprobation, and the mystery of Israel’s hardening and eventual restoration, he does not offer a tidy resolution. He bursts into the doxology that serves as the series verse of this entire course:

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Romans 11:33–36, NASB 1995

This is the only appropriate response to the doctrine of the decrees. Not a smug satisfaction in having the right theology; not a cold, mechanical submission to an impersonal fate; but an adoring wonder before a God whose wisdom is unsearchable, whose ways are unfathomable, whose judgments are beyond tracing out, and who nevertheless, in the mystery of His sovereign grace, has chosen to include us among those who are from Him and through Him and to Him. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: The doctrine of the divine decrees is not a theological puzzle to be solved but a pastoral foundation to be rested upon. You may not be able to explain compatibilism or adjudicate between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism. But you can know this: the God who saved you purposed your salvation before the foundation of the world, and what He has purposed He will not abandon. You are in hands from which nothing can pluck you.

For the long-tenured saint: Return to the golden chain of Romans 8:29–30 as you would return to a well-worn anchor in a storm. The same God who foreknew you, predestined you, called you, and justified you has already, in the language of eternity, glorified you. The verb is past tense: “these whom He justified, He also glorified.” Your glorification is as certain as your justification, because both rest on the same immutable eternal decree of the same faithful God.

For the one who is suffering: The hardest thing to believe in the midst of grief is that this, this specific, particular, agonizing thing, is within the sovereign purposes of a good God. The doctrine of the decrees does not explain why; it asserts who. The God who has foreordained this trial is the God who gave His own Son for you, the God whose wisdom is unsearchable, the God who works all things together for good for those who love Him. He has not miscalculated. He has not been surprised. And He has not forgotten you.

For the doubter: The doctrine of the decrees raises some of the hardest questions in theology. Why did God decree the fall? Why has He not decreed the salvation of every person? Why does evil exist within a universe governed by an all-wise, all-good God? These questions are not answered fully in this lesson, they cannot be, because God has not revealed the full counsel of His eternal purposes. But the framework this lesson provides, the distinction between God’s decretive and preceptive will, the compatibility of sovereignty and responsibility, the immutability of God’s good purposes, equips us to hold these questions with faith rather than despair.

Key Texts: *Ephesians 1:4–5, 11; Acts 2:23; Acts 4:27–28; Romans 9:11; Isaiah 46:10; Romans 8:29–30*

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
The Decrees of God	God's eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His own will, whereby He has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, for His own glory. The decrees are eternal, wise, free, unconditional, immutable, comprehensive, and efficacious. They are not temporal decisions but the eternal expression of God's sovereign purposing before creation.
Decretive Will	God's sovereign will of decree, His eternal determination of all that comes to pass. The decretive will is always accomplished; nothing God has decreed fails to occur. Distinguished from the preceptive will, which expresses what God commands but which creatures may disobey. Also called the sovereign will, the will of good pleasure, or the efficacious will.
Preceptive Will	God's revealed moral will, His commands and moral standards expressed in Scripture. The preceptive will is not always accomplished, because God permits His moral creatures to disobey His commands. Genuine violations of the preceptive will (sin) may be simultaneously within the decretive will (permitted and governed by God for His purposes). Also called the revealed will or the will of command.
Compatibilism	The position that divine sovereignty and human freedom are compatible, that God's sovereign foreordination of all things does not eliminate but is exercised through the genuine free choices of moral creatures. Human freedom, on this view, is defined not as independence from God's decree (libertarian free will) but as the ability to act according to one's own desires without external coercion. The standard position of Reformed theology.
Libertarian Free Will	The view that genuine human freedom requires the ability to have chosen otherwise under exactly the same conditions, that a free choice is one uncaused by any prior determining factors, including God's decree. Held by Arminian and Open Theist theologians; rejected by the Reformed tradition as incompatible with the biblical doctrine of divine sovereignty and as resting on a philosophical rather than biblical definition of freedom.
Supralapsarianism	The lapsarian position that in the logical order of the divine decrees, the decree of election and reprobation precedes the decree to permit the fall. The objects of election and reprobation are, on this view, human beings considered as not-yet-created and not-yet-fallen. Associated with Beza, Perkins, and Gomarus. Historically a minority position within the Reformed tradition.
Infralapsarianism	The lapsarian position that in the logical order of the divine decrees, the decree of election and reprobation follows the decree

	to permit the fall. The objects of election and reprobation are, on this view, human beings considered as already fallen. The majority position of the Reformed tradition, reflected in the Westminster Confession and the 1689 Baptist Confession.
Preterition	From the Latin <i>praeterire</i> (“to pass by”). The aspect of reprobation in which God sovereignly passes over certain individuals, not choosing them for salvation. Distinguished from the punitive aspect of reprobation (just condemnation for sin). The infralapsarian tradition has emphasized preterition as a sovereign act of God that precedes, and is distinct from, the condemnation that follows from the individual's own sin.
Golden Chain	The traditional name for the sequence of Romans 8:29–30: foreknowledge → predestination → calling → justification → glorification. Called the “golden chain” because each link is unbreakable: all who are foreknown are predestined; all who are predestined are called; all who are called are justified; all who are justified are (already, in the certainty of God's eternal decree) glorified. The chain is the theological ground of the believer's perseverance and ultimate salvation.
Efficacious Grace	The grace of God in calling and regenerating the elect, which is certain in its effect, it accomplishes what it intends. Distinguished from sufficient grace (which provides the capacity to respond) and common grace (which restrains evil and bestows natural blessings). Efficacious grace does not override the will but so renews and transforms the will of the elect that they freely and genuinely embrace the gospel. Also called irresistible grace (the “I” of the TULIP).
Concurrence	The doctrine that God cooperates with the free actions of His creatures in such a way that those actions are simultaneously and genuinely both the creature's own free acts and the expression of God's sovereign providential governance. Concurrence is the mechanism by which God's comprehensive decree is carried out through secondary causes without coercion and without God becoming the author of sin.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the sovereign decree of God encompasses all things without exception, not in a way that makes God the author of sin or that destroys the genuine freedom and responsibility of moral creatures, but in a way that means nothing in all of creation, history, or personal experience lies outside the governing purposes of the all-wise, all-powerful, all-good God who has revealed Himself in Scripture. This is not a belief that can be held abstractly, as a theological proposition without personal weight; it must be held as a living conviction that transforms the way we relate to suffering, uncertainty, death, and the apparent chaos of the world around us.

We must also believe the two wills of God with equal firmness. God's decretive will governs all things; His preceptive will commands our obedience. The existence of God's decretive will is never an excuse for disobeying His preceptive will. The Calvinist who says, "If God has foreordained my salvation, I need not concern myself with repentance and faith" has misunderstood both wills. God decrees the end (salvation) and the means (repentance, faith, perseverance); to refuse the means while claiming the end is a logical and spiritual contradiction.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the doctrine of the decrees quiet your anxious heart. One of the most pervasive forms of spiritual suffering in the contemporary church is the anxiety that comes from treating life as if it were fundamentally uncertain, as if the outcome of every crisis depended ultimately on our own choices, our own strength, our own faithfulness. The doctrine of the decrees does not eliminate the genuine weight of human choices; it places them within a framework in which the ultimate outcome of all things has already been settled by the sovereign decree of a God who cannot fail.

Desire, above all, the doxological response to which the doctrine inevitably drives the soul that has truly grasped it. Romans 11:33–36 is the proper terminus of Theology Proper: not a theological system, however carefully constructed, but a worshipping heart that has glimpsed the unsearchable wisdom of a God who works all things after the counsel of His will and who, in His sovereign and inexplicable grace, has chosen to include us in those purposes from before the foundation of the world.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Rest in the sovereignty of God over your specific circumstances. The next time you face a situation that feels out of control, a medical diagnosis, a broken relationship, a financial crisis, an uncertain future, bring the doctrine of the decrees to bear on it. This specific situation is not outside the sovereign purposes of the God who has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. Pray not merely for relief but for the faith to trust the God whose ways are unsearchable.
- Distinguish between God's decretive and preceptive will in your ethical reasoning. When you face a moral decision, do not ask what God has decreed will happen; ask what God has commanded. The preceptive will is your guide for obedience;

the decretive will is the framework within which your obedience occurs. Never use the sovereignty of God as an excuse for moral passivity or ethical indifference.

- Preach and teach the compatibility of sovereignty and responsibility. The most common objection to the doctrine of the decrees in popular Christian thinking is that it eliminates human freedom and responsibility. Be prepared to address this objection carefully and clearly, using the biblical model of Acts 2:23 and the theological framework of compatibilism. The goal is not to win an argument but to help people rest in a God who is sovereign without being a tyrant and who holds creatures accountable without being unjust.
- Let the immutability of the decrees strengthen your confidence in the promises of God. Every promise of Scripture rests on the immutable decree of the God who made it. When doubt assails you, when you wonder whether God's promises will hold, whether your salvation is secure, whether the new creation will actually come, return to the decrees. What God has purposed from eternity will come to pass. His promises are as certain as His eternal counsel.
- Cultivate doxology as the natural fruit of this doctrine. The doctrine of the decrees, rightly grasped, does not produce fatalism, passivity, or arrogance, it produces worship. Join Paul in the doxology of Romans 11:33–36. Memorize it. Return to it whenever the doctrine of the decrees presses upon you with its full weight. The right response to the unsearchable wisdom of God is not a syllogism; it is a hymn.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Before this lesson, how did you think about the relationship between God's sovereignty and the events of your daily life? Did you tend to think of God as actively governing every detail, or as setting general directions while leaving the particulars to chance or human choice? How does the doctrine of the decrees challenge or confirm your prior thinking?

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Ephesians 1:3–14. Identify every reference to God's eternal purposing, choosing, predestining, or willing in this passage. What is the stated ground of election in verse 5? What is the stated ultimate goal in verse 12 and verse 14?

3. Read Acts 2:22–24 and Acts 4:27–28. In each passage, identify both the human actions and the divine ordination. How does Peter (in Acts 2) hold together the full culpability of the crucifiers with the sovereignty of God's predetermined plan? What does this teach us about the relationship between God's decretive will and human moral responsibility?

4. Read Isaiah 46:9–10. What does God claim about His knowledge of the future? What is the relationship between God's foreknowledge and His purposing? How does this passage establish the comprehensiveness and efficacy of the divine decrees?

5. Read Romans 8:28–30. What is the logical sequence of the "golden chain"? Notice that "glorified" is stated in the past tense (aorist in Greek). What does this indicate about the certainty of the believer's ultimate glorification?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

6. Explain in your own words the distinction between God's decretive will and His preceptive will. Give a biblical example of each. Why is this distinction essential for understanding how God can be sovereign over evil without being its author?

7. What is compatibilism, and how does it differ from the libertarian view of free will? Which view does the Reformed tradition endorse, and why? How does Acts 2:23 serve as a model for the compatibilist position?

8. Summarize the difference between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism. What is the primary theological concern of each position? Why does the Reformed tradition generally prefer infralapsarianism, and why does the Westminster Confession avoid explicitly choosing between them?

9. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass "for His own glory." Some find this troubling, it seems to make God self-serving at the expense of His creatures. How would you respond to this concern? How does Jonathan Edwards' insight, that God's glory and the creature's highest good converge rather than compete, bear on this question?

10. How do the characteristics of the divine decrees (eternal, wise, free, unconditional, immutable, comprehensive, efficacious) bear on the practical question of the believer's assurance of salvation? Which characteristic is most significant for assurance, and why?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

11. The lesson argues that the doctrine of the decrees should produce doxology rather than fatalism. In your own experience, has the doctrine of God's sovereignty tended to produce worship and rest, or has it produced passivity, confusion, or anxiety? What might need to change in how you are relating to this doctrine?

12. If a friend said to you, "If God has already determined everything that will happen, why should I pray, evangelize, or make any effort at all?" how would you respond? Draw on the distinction between God's decretive will (which decrees ends) and His use of means (through which He accomplishes those ends) in your answer.

13. Think of a situation in your own life, past or present, where the events felt random, chaotic, or outside any good purpose. How does the doctrine that God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass speak to that situation? Does the doctrine help, challenge, or both? Be honest.

14. Romans 11:33–36 is both the series verse of this course and the natural doxological terminus of the doctrine of the decrees. Take a moment now, as a group, to read it slowly and prayerfully. What specific attribute of God does verse 33 celebrate? What three rhetorical questions does Paul ask in verses 34–35, and what is the answer implied by each? How does verse 36 serve as a Trinitarian doxology that gathers up the whole doctrine of the decrees?

Prayer Focus

Open your time of prayer by meditating together on Psalm 33:6–11: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host... The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation” (NASB 1995). Let these verses set the tone: we are in the presence of a God whose counsel is eternal and whose plans cannot be frustrated.

Pray specifically for the grace to rest in the sovereignty of the God who has decreed all things wisely and well. Confess the anxiety that comes from treating life as if its outcome depended on us. Ask for the faith to trust the decree even when the decrees purposes are not visible. Pray for the specific situations of suffering or uncertainty represented in your group, and bring each one before the throne of the God who has foreordained them with wisdom and love that surpass all understanding.

Close with the doxology of Romans 11:33–36 spoken together, not as a formula, but as a genuine outpouring of adoration before the God whose wisdom is unsearchable, whose ways are unfathomable, and from whom and through whom and to whom are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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