

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

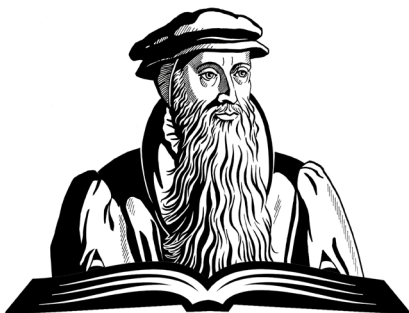
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2:

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Lecture 9

GOD'S DECREE



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 2 ~ The Doctrine of God

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Module 2 ~ Lecture 9

GOD'S DECREE

Reading history can be fascinating. There are so many twists and turns, and so many unexpected and surprising events that unfold. We see this even in the history recorded in the Bible. Think of the complicated story of Joseph. He has a dream, in which he's told that his brothers will bow down before him, and yet everything that unfolds after that seems to contradict it. He's thrown into a pit, he's sold into slavery, he's taken to a far country, he's betrayed by his master's house, he's put in prison and forgotten about there, and there's one thing after another. And when you first hear the story, you find yourself sitting on the edge of your seat wondering, "What will happen next?" At several points, it appears as if God's plan has failed, and that everything is over for Joseph, only to discover another twist and an open door, ultimately leading to the salvation of God's people in the end. The same is true, for example, at the end of the Old Testament, in the story of Esther. You think of how close, it seems, that the people of Israel came to extinction. And yet the Lord turns things in a split second and brings about abundant good. The same is true in many other accounts. You can trace this beyond the Bible, through the history of the world, and especially the history of the church down through the ages. Even in our present contemporary context, the believer may often wonder, "What is God doing in these events? Where will this lead? What will be the outcome? What are His intentions?" Though we may not always see clearly the immediate answers to questions about specific events, the believer does have more fundamental truths revealed to us, which provide a foundation upon which we can rest our faith. We know that God is at the helm of history. We know that nothing is outside of His control. We know that His perfect plan will certainly come to pass, and we know that His plan will serve His glory and the advance of Christ's kingdom. Our sight may be blurry in viewing present circumstances, but our faith sees clearly the God behind those circumstances.

The series of lectures in this second module, of course, on systematic theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of God. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself. In the previous lectures, we've been exploring what the Bible teaches about God Himself both in unity and in Trinity. In this and the following lectures, we will turn our attention to all things outside of God, namely, creation. We learn that all that exists, exists because God decreed its existence. So we begin with the question, "Why, and for what purpose, did God create all things?" The answer is found in the *decree of God*. We will consider an introduction to this all-important, fundamental doctrine. But as has been our pattern, first of all, we'll begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of divine decrees.

We read in Isaiah 46:9 and 10, these words, "Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will

do all my pleasure.” Notice in this passage the connection between who God is and what God does. He begins by saying, “I am God,” and so on. As you study systematic theology, you’ll discover that all of the other doctrines of the Bible flow from the doctrine of God Himself. Who God is informs our understanding of what God does outside of Himself in the created cosmos. God is eternal and unchangeable and all-wise and sovereign. And since He is God, His most holy determinations must always come to pass. As the independent, self-sufficient God, He does not look outside Himself for reasons to do anything. All is accomplished according to the counsel of His will, and must always serve His interests and glory. This text in Isaiah says that He declares the end from the beginning. So before anything happens in history, God declares all that will come to pass, clear through to the end of all things. Now, He declares it because He determines it Himself, and what He determines cannot be altered in the least degree. As that Isaiah passage says, “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.” God does not decide things based on a response to things in this world. Nothing among men can change what He decrees.

Now we know this truth, because God revealed it to us in the Scriptures. We know that God decrees all that comes to pass, but we do not know what He decreed before it comes to pass. Remember the words of Deuteronomy 29:29, “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” So we must distinguish between God’s sovereign will of decree, which is secret in God Himself, and on the other hand, God’s revealed will in His Word, that is, in the Scriptures. In reference to the former, His will of decree, the eternal purpose of God brings to pass whatever He ordained according to the counsel of His will alone.

In this lecture, we will explore an introduction to the doctrine of the divine decree, providing some basic categories and terminology that will equip us for exploring these truths further in the days ahead. The doctrine of the decree once again stretches our minds, humbling us, and leading us to worship God. So it warrants careful attention, as an all-important Biblical doctrine.

Secondly, let’s consider the doctrinal exposition of the divine decrees. This doctrine is summarized in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 3, paragraph 1, which says, “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.” So that’s Westminster Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 1. In seeking to expound this doctrine, there are several points that we must have firmly fixed in our minds.

First of all, let’s define our terms. The divine “decree” refers to the act of God, by which He determines the existence and future of all that is outside of Himself. God is the first cause, and the director, and governor of all events. We trace all things back to what God’s will causes. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, question and answer 7, provides what I think is a succinct definition. It says, “The decrees of God are, His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.” So notice that it says “decrees,” plural, are defined by His “purpose,” which is in the singular. So God has one single eternal purpose. Don’t think in terms of an order of succession in time or deliberation. You also notice that the goal of the decree is the glory of God alone.

Secondly, the decree is eternal. It has no beginning, no end, no succession in time. Now from our side, we see the individual unfolding of events in time and space, but this is the effect of God’s decree. All that happens is the outworking of a plan already established by God. So God’s decree is simple and eternal like Himself. We saw this in Isaiah 46:9-10 at the beginning of this lecture,

“He declares the end from before the beginning.” It’s eternal.

Thirdly, the decree is a free act. What do we mean by that? The origin of the decree is in God Himself. It’s not determined by something outside Him in this world. Think of Paul’s words in Ephesians 1:11, which speaks of God acting, “according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.” Or think of the words of Job 23:13, “But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? And what his soul desireth, even that he doeth.” So God did not determine things based on anything He foresaw in creatures—it was a free act. The Lord wasn’t compelled by anything outside Himself.

Fourthly, that means God’s decree is not conditional—it is not conditioned on something else. If you go back to Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 3, it continues in paragraph 2 with these words, “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.” So if we were to say that God decreed certain things because He foresaw and responded to something in creation, then we would be supposing their existence independent of God, which would unravel everything we already learned about God Himself. No other being exists apart from God first decreeing their existence, as well as all that follows from it. And so, when we’re thinking about God, we don’t think, “Well, if people were going to do thus and such, then the Lord determined to do something else.” It’s not conditional.

Fifthly, the decree is immutable. It is unchangeable. If nothing else caused God’s decree, but rather His eternal decree causes everything, then the decree is an immutable decree of an immutable God, an unchanging decree of an unchangeable God. What God decreed will happen, without alteration, without adjustment or modification. In Numbers 23:19, we read, “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?”

Sixthly, we see the divine decree is comprehensive. It includes everything that comes to pass. Again, you’ll note the words “all things” in Ephesians 1:11, “according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.” Nothing that exists or happens is excluded from the all-encompassing, universal will of God. And so it is comprehensive. We’ll speak further about this in the lecture on the doctrine of providence.

Seventhly, if God is the first cause, decreeing all things, then what about second causes? And what about man’s free agency to make decisions without being something like a robot? We saw in Westminster Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 1, that it said, “Nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.” So God is *the* first cause, not *a* first cause; God is *the* first cause. And then everything else, in terms of cause and effect, are secondary, or second causes. In understanding the relationship between God as the only first cause and all other second causes, that relationship is called the doctrine of concurrence. Concurrence involves the idea of two things running together or side-by-side. You can think of confluent rivers—two rivers that are coming together, or two rivers running side-by-side one another—they concur. These two things that we’re speaking of are the first cause and all second causes, so do not think in terms of only two options. This is the kind of basic mistake that people make. They think only in terms of two options—either God does something, or man does it. And they think of those as the two options. But that would assume that all causes are first causes, which, of course, is impossible. So men act freely in accordance with the scope of their volition. And we’ll speak more about what that scope is, because fallen man, sinful man, is restricted in his will and abilities by his own fallen nature. But men act freely in accordance with

the scope of their volition, *and* God accomplishes His purposes, through all that they do, perfectly, immutably, eternally—all that we saw earlier. So the first cause concurs with second causes. You see this in the Bible, Proverbs 19:21, “There are many devices in a man’s heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand.” Or you think of that story we were speaking about with Joseph. You get to the end, in Genesis 50:20, and he is speaking to his brothers, and he says, “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.” So what his brothers did, they did in their own choice and volition, and what they did, they’re responsible for—they sinned. But God was doing something, and He was bringing to pass His decree, which was going to result in something wonderful. Now, there’s no better place to see this than at the cross. You remember how it’s described in Acts 2:23; “Him,” that is, Christ, “being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God”—so God has decreed this, He’s decreed that He’s been delivered. Peter then says to them, “ye have taken” the Savior—“ye have taken” the Lord Jesus Christ, or, to use the words of the text, “ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.” So you see the point here. The point is that God had determined something, and men were bringing it to pass by their own choice. Similarly, in Acts 4:27–28, “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.” So these wicked men are doing what they want to do, in their wicked devices, but they’re actually bringing to pass what God had determined, in His own counsel. So we see that men are not compelled to do something by a force outside of themselves. They’re acting in their free agency within the scope of their limitations. But we also see that what they do fulfills God’s immutable purpose and plan. Now we’ll discuss this further in subsequent lectures. So that provides us with an overview of the doctrinal exposition.

Thirdly, we come to consider this doctrine polemically. What are the objections? Well, first of all, people will hear this Biblical doctrine, and they’ll think to themselves, “Well, God is the author of sin.” And you’ll remember Westminster Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 1, addresses this: “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.” So there’s an emphatic denial that God is the author of sin. And that must be the case, because the Bible teaches it. God is not the author of sin. He does not tempt or force man into sin. God actively decrees to permit sin. He’s not passive in it—He’s actively decreeing it, but it is a decree to permit sin. He does not actually work sin in men—they bear that guilt. So you have God’s immutable decree coming to pass through their sin, in order to serve the greater purposes of God’s glory.

Secondly, some will say, “Well, this eliminates the freedom of man.” We’ve noted already the Westminster Confession addresses this as well. It does not eliminate man’s freedom and choice of doing things that he wishes to do. No, man’s responsibility and man’s culpability are maintained. So men are thinking for themselves, speaking for themselves, acting according to their own will and desire; and what they choose to do, they’re responsible before God for, and, in instances of sin and rebellion, are guilty for it. So that free agency is maintained, but not to the exclusion of the fact that what does come to pass is perfectly in keeping with what God has decreed.

Thirdly, some will say that it breeds human apathy, passivity, a lack of motivated exertion, and so on. But it’s actually to the contrary. For the believer, it fuels our dependence upon God for all things. It’s casting us back on the Lord, and it’s recognizing that all is dependent upon Him, that we must receive from His hand the ability to do what would please Him and glorify Him, and so on. And so, when you have a sense of God’s overruling, sovereign execution of His own will, cou-

pled with our own responsibility, we're forced into a position of diligence, and of activity before the Lord, and in seeking His service. Because we know that, for the believer, in trusting the Lord, and in following the Lord, and in serving the Lord, and in sacrificing for the Lord, and so on and so forth, that God is actually orchestrating these things, and He's using them to display His glory, and to bring forward His own cause.

Fourthly, we should consider this practically. We can draw some practical application for ourselves. Just a few brief things here. First of all, we recognize the doctrine of divine decrees must be handled with wisdom and discernment. We're dealing with holy things here: who God is, and what God does. We're not to speak in a way that would be vain or empty or disrespectful or lightly of these things. We should walk in the fear of God when handling such doctrines, and with a sensitivity to those who are perhaps early on in their comprehension and ability to understand these things. We don't want to confuse them unnecessarily. We want to lead them with clarity to the truth.

Secondly, rather than being counterproductive to man's responsibility, and specifically to things like evangelism and the advance of the kingdom, it strengthens this. It strengthens our trust in the Lord. We recognize that what we're doing for the kingdom is something that God Himself is doing and is bringing it forward. So we don't have to worry about the outcomes. God is going to secure success for His own cause in these things. Even in our personal life, it strengthens our trust amid many difficulties, trials, afflictions, and many things that are confusing. We're able to fall back on this doctrine, knowing that we are safe and secure and that we can trust the Lord in all that He's unfolding.

Thirdly, it should destroy our pride and it should stimulate humility. Man is put in the dust by this doctrine. God is made altogether glorious. God is the one who is seen as all in all, and man becomes very small by way of consequence. So it humbles us.

But it should also produce lifelong gratitude to God. He rules and overrules in all the affairs of men. And therefore, we desire that all glory and honor must go to Him, not to man and to his achievements. We cannot lay claim to these things. We give the Lord the praise.

Well, in this lecture, we have provided a brief survey of the doctrine of the divine decree. There is much more to learn, of course, but this provides some help for understanding God's work in the world, leading us to long for a greater knowledge of Him. In the next lecture, we'll turn our consideration to the doctrine of predestination, which addresses the divine decree within the arena of God redeeming men for His own glory.