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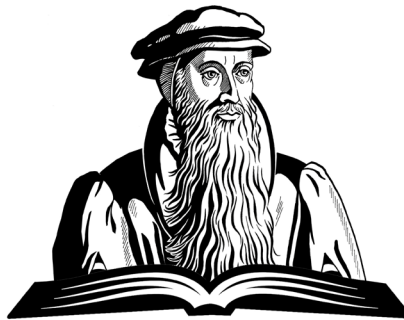
Shorter
CATECHISM

VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

Lecture #5

The Decrees of God
Catechism Questions 7 and 8



The John Knox Institute
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Lecture #5

The Decrees of God

Question 7: *What are the decrees of God?*

Answer: *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.*

Question 8: *How doth God execute his decrees?*

Answer: *God executeth his decrees in the works of creation and providence.*

In our lesson today, we look at two Questions that touch on God's plan. As we'll see, the Bible teaches us that God has a plan that includes all things that take place throughout this universe. Listen to Question 7 of the Shorter Catechism: "What are the decrees of God?—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." This Question and Answer present to us God's plan. Well, Question 8 identifies how God carries out his plan. "How doth God execute his decrees?—God executeth his decrees in the works of creation and providence."

Now let's look at the key words in these Answers. In the Answer to the 7th Question, "What are the decrees of God," we have several important words.

The word "decrees"—this word refers to God's plans, his decisions about what he would do in the world.

The words "eternal purpose"—purpose is the reason or goal for something. And here, it's said to be eternal. It's God's eternal purpose, his purpose that he always has had and will have.

And the words "counsel of his will"—when we receive counsel, we receive insight or advice from others. However, God's counsel is from himself—the only perfect source.

The word "foreordained"—this word means "determined ahead of time."

Finally, the words, "whatsoever comes to pass"—these words tell us that everything that happens, whatever comes to pass, is part of his perfect plan.

Well, the 8th Question, "How doth God execute his decrees? Tells us how God accomplishes his plan.

The word "executeth" means to carry out, or to accomplish.

The word "works" refers to God's actions and how he carries out his plan.

The word "creation" is, of course, one of God's works, whereby he made all things. We'll talk

more about this in Questions 9 and 10.

The word “providence” is another of God’s works. This word refers to God’s oversight of every detail in all the world, and we’ll talk more about this in Questions 10 and 11.

As we’ve noted, Question 8 introduces the way God carries out his decrees. It is setting up for our next few Questions. So we’ll look at creation and providence more fully in future lessons. In this lesson, let’s look at four ideas. First, the fact of God’s purpose—God has an eternal purpose. Second, the counsel of God’s purpose—God wisely considered his purpose. Third, the goal of God’s purpose—God ordered everything in his purpose toward the best goal. And fourth, the scope of God’s purpose—God’s purpose includes everything.

Well first, the fact of God’s purpose—God has an eternal purpose. Rarely does someone build a house without a plan to guide them. In fact, it’s rare that we would find any of us doing anything without some plan about what we’re about to do. Well, the best buildings follow plans that have worked through many details. And this is true as well of God’s work. All of his actions follow a perfect plan. The wonder of this is that his plan is eternal. That is, he doesn’t come up with it as things develop. He’s not waiting to see some things that will come to pass, and then making an additional plan. You and I need to adjust our plans. God’s plan has been one and the same for all eternity. In the book of Acts, James acknowledges this very truth, in chapter 15, and verse 18. It says, “Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.” Before the world, God had established his plan. This is why Paul can speak of God’s choice of some unto salvation as having occurred before the world. We see this in Ephesians 1, and verse 4, “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.” His plan was, as Paul noted, “before the foundation of the world,” that is, he established the plan in eternity before the world was. His eternal plan is perfect. There is no plan “B” because plan “A” is God’s eternal purpose.

Well, second, the counsel of God’s purpose—God wisely considered his purpose. If you or I were planning a trip to an important city that we’ve never visited, we would want to ask people who know more about it than we do. Or if we were considering an important decision to make, we should ask those who have more wisdom and experience. You see, we depend upon those who understand more than we understand, who have more experience than our experience. It’s important for us to ask questions from people wiser than we, that we can make wise decisions.

Well, God did not need to ask for input from others. He did not need to sit down with angels, or men, and gather their insights, and perspectives, and thoughts. He wasn’t stumped by certain things that were before him. Rather, God determined all things by his own perfect wisdom. He is the perfectly wise God. He’s sovereignly determined all that happens. We see this in Ephesians 1, and verse 11. We read, “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.” Did you hear that? “who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.” Everything that is done is done as God has determined by his own will.

Now why didn’t he need to ask for input? Why was it not wise for him to go and seek advice from others? Well, if you think back to Question 4 of the Catechism, you’ll have the answer: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom,” and so on. You see, his wisdom is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. He did not lack any perspective. He did not lack any good insight. He possesses all wisdom, perfectly so, and forever. And so he did not need to seek the advice of others, because he had all wisdom, and ever has it.

Well, third then, the goal of God’s purpose—God ordered everything in his purpose toward

the best goal. Every plan we make has a reason motivating it. When we give a gift to someone we love, our purpose perhaps is to show our love and to encourage them. If we hold the hand of our little brother or sister while we cross the street, it's because we have a purpose to provide them help and safety. Sometimes our purpose is more obvious to us, other times it's less clear, but if we were to stop and think about it, we can always find out our purpose by asking this question—"Why am I doing this?"

God also has a purpose in all that he has planned. There is a "why" for everything that he has determined to do. Think of the things he does. He made the world and all that is in it. He feeds the birds. He brings storms. He causes the sun to shine. He directs the stars above us. He shows kindness and mercy to his creatures. He graciously saves some sinners, while he righteously punishes others. He raises up kingdoms, and throws other kingdoms down. Now, with all of these and everything else that he does, why does it do them? The Bible tells us that he does all of this to display his glory. Everything was created for his glory.

Notice the following verses, Colossians 1, and verse 16: "For by him were all things created that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him." Psalm 19, verse 1: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handiwork." You see, everything has been planned to show forth God's praise. Even the great wonder of God's sovereignty over those who are graciously saved, and those who are justly condemned for their sins. Even this displays God's glory. This is what Paul asserts, in Romans 9, verses 22 and 23. He writes, "What if God, willing to show his wrath, and make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory." Notice in these weighty truths, God is doing these things to show something, to display something of himself, that he would be gloriously seen and understood by them. It's a difficult passage for us, because it reminds us that God has decreed, that is, he has determined, who will be saved by grace, and who will be punished for their sins.

Ultimately, we acknowledge that God, who is good and holy, is the one who has chosen what will come to pass. And we are assured by Paul, in Ephesians 1, and verse 6, that this will be "to the praise of the glory of his grace." In other words, though some today sinfully complain about God's choices, on the last day, all will give glory and praise to God, who has done all things well.

Some might think that it is a selfish motive for God to seek his own glory, however, this is to misunderstand the truth. God is the infinitely glorious one. If he were to have appointed a different purpose, he would have sought out something less than what is perfect. He would have established a goal that was beneath what was best. Because he is the infinitely glorious one, it is right and good that all things should be done to his praise.

Well, fourth, the scope of God's purpose—God's purpose includes everything. If we were planning on building a house, we would have a lot to consider—measurements, and material, the order of construction, how long it's going to take. But even the best plan would not be able to include everything. For instance, we couldn't plan out the weather for the days we were working. There would be many other things like that outside of our control. However, God's plan includes every detail that takes place in all of the universe, and throughout all of history. Remember Ephesians 1, and verse 11, "In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." All things—he works all things after the counsel of his own will. Everything that comes to pass is happening as

God has determined it.

Well, does this mean that God is active in our sinning? Certainly not. James tells us, in James 1, verses 13 and 14, “God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.” Does this mean then that sin is outside of God’s control? Not at all. This is a great wonder to us, however we can see God’s perfect sovereignty, even over man’s sin in the Bible. The Bible gives us instances where God is shown to be sovereign, and yet not the one who is actively engaged in the sin. Notice, for instance, Acts, chapter 2, and verse 23. Peter is preaching of Jesus Christ, and he says that the Jews wickedly treated him. He says, “Him”—that is, Jesus Christ—“being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.” Do you see it? Christ was delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God. That is, God decreed it to happen. Yet the action of the Jews was sinful, it was done with wicked hands. The sins of men are not chargeable to God. The sins are committed under the sovereign purpose of God in such a way that the sinner is responsible for his wickedness. Now you and I may have many questions about this, but again, it’s important for us to gather our thoughts and our understanding from the only source that has no error, and that is true in everything that it says—the Bible.

Well, as we close, let me direct your mind to three final thoughts. First, when we truly understand the fact that God is sovereign over all that is, it should humble us. This was God’s lesson to Job. When you read Job, chapters 38 through 41, you gain a view of God who is over all that is. This has the effect of humbling Job. You see it again in Nebuchadnezzar, in Daniel, chapter 4. King Nebuchadnezzar had become proud at the sight of his great kingdom. The Lord, however, brought him low, and in the end, Nebuchadnezzar declared what’s recorded in Daniel, chapter 4, and verse 37. He says, “Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase.” Nebuchadnezzar had come to see that there is a King who rules over all, and performs all his holy will. And this King is God. We too much acknowledge the same. God is the only one who carries out his will at all times. He is the only one who is truly the Ruler of all creation, and that ruling comes from his plan—his decrees. This is one way in which God is infinitely greater than we are. God rules all things perfectly in accordance to his perfect and eternal plan. It is for us to humble ourselves, and to give praise to him who truly is King over all.

Well, second, in closing, notice the fact that God has a perfect plan over all things. This doesn’t mean that we should ignore his promises or commands. His promises are real promises to be believed. His commands are real commands to be obeyed. In other words, this truth of his eternal plan doesn’t make us robots. It doesn’t make us puppets. When we do not obey his commands, we are guilty of sin. When we do not believe his promises, we are guilty of unbelief. There is a great mystery to this. However, the Lord himself calls us to give our attention to his revealed Word. We’re not to imagine, and think, and wonder at what his secret plan may be. We’re to fix our attention on his Word, and the revealed truth of his promises and commands. Notice Deuteronomy 29, and verse 29: “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.” There are some things that are hidden from us—many things that are hidden from us. However, the things God has revealed to us in his Word are to be believed and obeyed. What should we do then? We should confess our many sins, and our slowness of heart to believe his promises. We should cry out to God for his grace to give us faith and repentance. And in doing so, we appeal to the great God of heaven and earth to show his mercy—a thing that he has revealed that he is pleased to show.

Well, third, in closing, for the believer, there is great comfort in knowing that God has ordered everything for the best purpose. Many times, we cannot make sense of how this experience or that experience in our lives would fit into the overall purpose of God. However, we are able to trust God that it does. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, in Romans 8, and verse 28, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” Because God has planned all that is, and purposes all that is to his glory, and because he has promised to his people that all will be to their ultimate good, the believer can trust him, even in the most difficult times. And so far from this causing us great consternation and frustration, the believer is given a great cause of confidence that He who does all things well is in charge, even of the difficulties. So I encourage you to take Psalm 23, and there see the expression of faith, trusting a God who is perfectly in control of all things, and resting in his promises. And as you do, may God give you faith, both to trust him and love to worship him.