

Essay VIII

"The Decrees of God"

by

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Having in some preceding essays considered the marvelous works of God, his works of creation and providence, and the holy sovereignty which he exercises in all his works, especially in his government of the moral system, we may, in the next place, attend to the doctrine of his *Decrees*. For it is absurd to suppose that his great and wonderful works, which have been brought into view, could have been performed without any previous purpose or decree. The Psalmist, when he was about to relate in a way of prophecy the glorious things to be accomplished by the Messiah, says, "I will declare the decree" [Ps. 2:7]. These things were the execution of a divine decree. Had there been no decree respecting the coming of Christ and the great work of redemption, who can suppose it possible that these works should ever have been accomplished?

In the discussion of this weighty and important subject, an attempt will be made to prove that every event in the universe--without exception--goes to the accomplishment of the decrees of God. Of him it is said, as we have noticed already, that he "works all things after the counsel of his own will" [Eph. 1:11]. His *working all things* is the work of divine providence, and *the counsel of his own will* is his decree. His decree, therefore, as well as his works of providence, extends to all things.

It is indeed very evident from reason, as well as scripture, that no rational being can be supposed to act without an established plan and purpose. But the plan and purpose of God constitute his decrees. Admit that he is a rational being who acts in view of the highest motives, and the doctrine of his decrees is established. It is at least evident that whatever God or any other rational being does by his own free and immediate agency is done in consequence of a decree. And since we have found evidence that God is an eternal and immutable being, it clearly follows that all his purposes are eternal and immutable.

If we consult the scriptures of truth on this important subject, we shall find that God has a purpose, or decree, as well as a providential agency in the production of all events. All depend on his will and pleasure. Surely God, who created the heavens and the earth and the fullness thereof (so that all were pronounced very good) must have had a definite plan of operation. If not, how could he make all things for himself? How could he secure to himself the highest possible glory? How could he declare with the least appearance of truth, "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" [Isa. 46:10]?

That the decrees of God extend to all events is evident from the universality of his providence. If the works of divine providence, or the works of creation or any other works, extend beyond the divine decrees, then these extra works are altogether undesigned, uncontrolled, and useless. Indeed, voluntary actions are impossible if they are supposed to be destitute of a purpose or decree. What is there in the nature of things which can prompt the divine Being to action

beyond the extent of his purpose or decree? Certainly nothing.

Corresponding with the view which we have taken of the decrees of God, we have a very lucid and scriptural definition in the shorter catechism. "The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his own will, whereby for his own glory he has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass." *Decree, foreordination, and eternal purpose* are synonymous terms. Another term synonymous with these is *predestination*. "Being predestinated according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will" [Eph. 1:11]. "Having predestinated us to the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" [Eph. 1:5]. "Whom he did foreknow, them he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son" [Rom. 8:29].

Eternal purpose, counsel, or decree, is always represented as preceding the works of God. For instance, the great work of creation--by which is displayed the manifold wisdom of God--is said by the Apostle to be "According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" [Eph. 3:11]. Also the greater works of regeneration and conversion to God are said to be divine operations according to the foreordination of God. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them" [Eph. 2:10]. Foreordination and decree are not only the same thing, but they are a thing which invariably precedes the great work of divine grace in the regeneration and conversion of sinners, and all other divine works of every name and nature whatsoever.

The doctrine of God's decrees, which is now under consideration, is still further evident from his absolute foreknowledge of all things. "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" [Acts 15:18], or from eternity. But the foreknowledge of God depends on the fixed certainty of the things foreknown. It is impossible that any future event should be known unless it be unalterably fixed and rendered certain of an existence. But how can any event which is yet future be rendered certain by any means short of the purpose and will of God? Without these, nothing can be established; and without being established, nothing can be known. Thus the foreknowledge of God depends entirely on his decrees.

In the order of nature, therefore, his decree must be antecedent to his foreknowledge, and must be the only ground of it. God is the cause, the designing and efficient cause of all the objects and events which he foreknows. The order of expression in the scriptures sometimes implies that the decree of God precedes his foreknowledge, particularly in what is said concerning the delivering of Christ to be crucified: "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" [Acts 2:23]. To show that there is, strictly speaking, no succession, no fore nor after in the divine mind, the decree and foreknowledge of God are expressed as being equally eternal. For instance, it is said, "Whom he did foreknow, them he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son" [Rom. 8:29]. The decrees of God evidently extend to all events, because such is the extent of his knowledge.

Omniscience evidently rests on the divine decrees. Eternal foreknowledge, which most people allow and admit to be an essential attribute of God, presupposes an eternal decree; so that if one is denied, the other must be denied. In scripture it is affirmed that "All things are naked and open unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do" [Heb. 4:13]. Of course, all things are unalterably fixed in the divine mind. For if this were not the case, nothing that is future could

be known even by the Deity himself, for nothing but certainties and realities can possibly be the objects of knowledge.

Still further to confirm the doctrine of God's decrees, let it be carefully observed that all those views and motives which have operated in the divine mind to produce any purposes or decrees are eternally and immutably the same. But if the motives are the same even from eternity, why not the decrees? Can it be supposed that the divine Being foresaw from eternity that a certain definite system of events would make the richest display of his own glory and in the highest possible degree promote the general good, and yet that he neglected to ratify and establish that system by his decree? If so, where is the evidence of his goodness? If all the benevolent motives of God's decrees existed in eternity as well as in time, how could he be disposed to suspend his decrees any more in eternity than in time? Most certainly, all the events of the universe are embraced in the divine decrees, which are eternally and immutably the same.

We observe further, that the decrees of God are strikingly evident from the prophecies contained in scriptures. When David was about to utter a glorious prophecy, he said, "I will declare the decree" [Ps. 2:7]. In uttering prophecy, God is said to "declare the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things which are not yet done" [Isa. 46:10]. And this declaration in a most striking manner expresses the divine decrees: "Saying, *My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure*" [Isa. 46:10]. This clearly implies that the declarations of prophecy are only the previous revelation of the counsel and pleasure of God. Prophecy is only the expression of foreknowledge. And as foreknowledge depends on a previous decree, by which things foreknown are made certain, the same is true respecting prophecy. It is the revelation of things previously and eternally established. It is remarkable, respecting the prophecies of scripture, that they relate many things which in human view are very improbable and seemingly impossible, and many things which depend on the free agency of men to accomplish. What security can there be for the accomplishment of the prophecies except a divine decree? If God has determined all events by an immutable decree, then the prophecies are perfectly easy. But if only one future event be left undetermined, it cannot be foretold.

Again, if the counsel and purpose of God extend to events which are brought about by human wickedness, then we may conclude with certainty that they extend to all other events. But we find in the scriptures many instances of great wickedness, in which the counsel and purpose of God are expressly acknowledged. When the Jewish counsel released Peter and John from confinement and from persecution, on account of their preaching and miracles, "They being let go went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. And when they heard *that*, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord" [Acts 4:23,24]. They united in joyful and solemn prayer, the substance of which is worthy of careful attention in reference to the great doctrine of God's eternal counsel or decrees. And they said, "Lord, thou art God, which has made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: who by the mouth of thy servant David has said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou has anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done" [Acts 4:24-28].

If the hand and counsel of God foredetermined the whole that was done by the awful combination

of Jews and gentiles against the Lord Jesus Christ (and this was certainly the case, for we read in plain terms that he was delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God), then we may safely conclude that all things are foredetermined. That same eternal and unchangeable counsel of God by which Joseph was sold into Egypt, by which Pharaoh's heart was hardened and the hearts of the Egyptians, by which the heart of Sihon king of Heshbon was hardened and his spirit was made obstinate, by which Shimei cursed David, by which the heathen nations were often sent against the people of Israel to chastise them for their idolatry (especially in the instance of the Babylonish captivity), and by which our Lord was crucified, extends to all creatures and things.

From these striking instances in which human wickedness is manifested, we are, as it were, impelled to the conclusion that the eternal counsel of God extends to all things, ordering and directing them for the richest display of his own glory and for the greatest good of the intelligent system. If [only] some and not all things were established by the divine purpose or decree, what an awful interference would exist between things decreed and things not decreed! The universe would be void of harmony, and present a scene of dire confusion. All things decreed would be frustrated, nothing could ever come to a happy termination. In this view, how infinitely important for the honor of God and for the consolation of all holy and intelligent creatures is the doctrine of divine decrees! The decrees of God are evidently a necessary fountain and source of all rational enjoyment, of all rational hope, and expectation of final good.

Finally, it is evident from reason that God cannot be indifferent respecting any event of creation or providence. If his providence extends to all his creatures and all their actions, then certainly his decrees are of equal extent. For in all instances and in all respects his works of providence are the execution of his decrees. "God executes his decrees," say the assembly of divines, "in his works of creation and providence." And the very idea of his having a preference or choice respecting any system of events amounts to a firm decree. To bring the world into existence, nothing more was necessary than an expression of the divine will. "He spoke, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast" [Ps. 33:9]. He preferred the existence to the non-existence of the world; and it existed in consequence of his decree. If it be admitted that God is not indifferent to any event however small and minute, even to the falling of a sparrow, the consequence is clear: that all events whatever are ordered and established by his eternal purpose or decree.

REMARKS

1. All the purposes or decrees of God are the fruit of infinite wisdom, goodness, and benevolence. Some are alarmed at the doctrine of divine decrees from an apprehension that it represents the Most High as an arbitrary sovereign and a despotic being, having no regard to reason or propriety. But far be it from the Holy One of Israel to decree unrighteous decrees, or to have no regard to reason and benevolence in forming his eternal counsels. The *holiness* of God, in which are included all his moral perfections, has been already proved from scripture and reason. In the exercise of perfect holiness, therefore, he forms all his purposes. All are formed with an undeviating regard to the greatest possible good. Every man who has a candid mind, and who is given to sober reflection, must be sensible that among all possible systems of events there must be one that as an infinite preference to all others; and that the omniscient Jehovah, who comprehends from eternity all these systems, doubtless discovers that which, all things

considered, is infinitely best. And since he is the Judge of all the earth, it is certain that he does and always will do right. This best of all systems, therefore, is established by the divine decree.

All the purposes of God are equally the result of infinite wisdom, goodness, and mercy. We have therefore an ample and joyful assurance that these purposes can never be altered for the better. This consideration should fully satisfy every mind with respect to the truth of the doctrine and the importance of its being taught and inculcated. If the decrees of God are essential to his own glory and to secure the greatest sum of good and happiness in the universe, then certainly every benevolent heart must be satisfied and must greatly rejoice, though the subject may be involved in a degree of mystery.

2. Another thing to be considered, in relation to the doctrine of the divine decrees, is that the means by which all events are accomplished are as much the subject of God's eternal purpose or decree as the events themselves. An objection urged by some against this glorious doctrine is that it renders the means of grace and salvation, and the means of every other good end whatever, both needless and useless. If men are predestinated to salvation, say some, they will be saved; and if to damnation, they will be damned let them do what they may. And the same objection is urged, or might with equal propriety be urged, in every other case. If it is the decree of God that we shall live, we shall live; and if that we shall die, do what we will we shall die. If it be the decree of God that we shall be rich or poor, healthy or sickly, such we shall be at all events. This is a rash and groundless inference from the doctrine of divine decrees. It is contrary to scripture, reason, and experience. The scriptures require true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the condition of salvation. If men believe not, they must be damned. Faith is a practical duty and is the means of salvation.

And the scriptures carry the idea of means still further. They affirm that faith itself "*comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*" [Rom. 10:17]. Reason and observation teach us that salvation and all other things take place in a regular course of means and ends. So long as the means of good are neglected, the good is never to be obtained. When Paul and a multitude with him were in great danger of perishing in a shipwreck, a divine decree was revealed for their consolation--that all should be delivered from the danger of the seas. After this, the danger increased so that the sailors were about to make their escape by the boat. At this Paul was alarmed, notwithstanding the decree, and declared that except these who alone could manage the vessel should abide in the ship, they could not be saved. Thus it is plain that means are as absolutely necessary to accomplish the decrees of God as the decrees are to the success of means. Those therefore who cavil [raise trivial objections] with the doctrine of the divine decrees on this ground, "*speaking evil of the things which they understand not*" [2 Pet. 2:12].

3. Since the decrees of God extend to all events, and at the same time human purposes and agency operate in innumerable instances and to accomplish innumerable purposes, we clearly infer that divine and human agency are exerted in producing the self-same events. Clearly to this point are the words of the Apostle, "*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure*" [Phil. 2:12,13]. So far as the people of God have any right purposes or exercises of heart, these purposes and exercises are as entirely their own as if they were originated in themselves without any divine decree or any other extraneous cause whatever. At the same time, it is plain that every right exercise is wrought in them according to the eternal purpose and good pleasure of God.

The same idea is expressed in the prophecy of Ezekiel. In the first place sinners are exhorted even to make themselves a new heart and a new spirit, and to turn themselves from all their transgressions. In the next place, the Lord says, "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you . . . and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them" [Ezek. 36:26,27]. Here it is evident that both divine and human agency are employed in the production of the new heart. David in prayer expressed the same idea. "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" [Ps. 51:10].

God is the sole cause of holy exercises in the hearts of sinful men, but sinners are at the same time required to be holy in heart and life. And whenever holiness takes place in their hearts, it consists in their own voluntary agency and not in the agency of God. The agency of God as the cause of human agency, in this case, alters not the nature of human agency in any measure, nor in any sense whatever. Both God and man act freely of choice and not of constraint or compulsion.

4. From a consideration of the great and solemn doctrine of divine decrees, we learn that by them every good is secured, and every evil (which is not essential in the plan of infinite wisdom and goodness to bring about the greatest general good) is prevented. What a glorious doctrine is this! How happily calculated to give us the most sublime and exalted views of the infinite Jehovah! Calculated to abase all human pride and vain glorying! Calculated to inspire us with a reverential awe and fear of the Lord, and to excite in our minds an unlimited confidence in him!

Nothing is better calculated to excite religious devotion. To those who cordially embrace this doctrine, the infinite God appears to be worthy of praise and adoration, and to him be rendered dominion and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Essay VIII, "The Decrees of God," from *A Compendium of the System of Divine Truth* by Jacob Catlin (Hartford: George Goodwin & Sons, 1818). **Note:** The text has not been modified except for some very light editing for clarity. Also, punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.