

Foundations of Christian Theology

Lesson 6

The Sovereign God: God's Decrees

Objective: To understand what the Bible teaches about God's sovereignty, which is first shown in his eternal plan, and to grasp the importance of this doctrine for our faith and life so that we can embrace it with sobriety, thanksgiving, and trust.

I. Review

II. Big Picture of God's Sovereignty

Reminder from God's Attributes (Lesson 4): Sovereignty is the truth that God's will (i.e., what God *desires* to do) and his power (i.e., what God is *able* to do) are never at odds with one another.

- **Psalm 115:3**, Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.
- **Psalm 135:6**, Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.
- **Job 41:1-2**, Then Job answered the LORD and said: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."
- **Daniel 4:35**, All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he [i.e., God] does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"
- **Romans 9:19**, Who can resist his will?

"What does it mean that the Bible teaches that God is sovereign? It means that God is in absolute control of his world and everything that happens, without any gaps, limits, interference, or thwarting of his rule. It means that God alone determines all that will happen and rules the means by which everything will happen. This means that God never has questions, never is surprised, never is frustrated, never wonders, never is greeted with mystery, never wishes he could have, never looks back with regret, never is hoping, never is waiting, never feels helpless, has nothing he can't figure out, and never finds himself at a loss. No one can back God into a corner. He is never pressed to do something. There is no authority over him that he has to answer to. He does what he pleases, decides whatever he wants, and acts as he wants. To say God is sovereign is simply to say that God is God and there is no one like him.

Everything in the world that is ordered and regular, like the passing of the seasons, day and night, the rise and fall of the tides, and infancy to old age, are all the result of God's sovereign rule over his world. He decides how his world will operate and then rules over the operations he has decided upon. Everything in the world that seems disordered and chaotic to us is also the result of God's sovereign rule over his world. His wisdom doesn't always seem wise to us. What would seem best to us is not the "best" that he has ordained for us. What seems tragically out of control is under his careful and constant control.

Understanding that we live in a world under God's unshakable and unchangeable rule changes everything we think about ourselves, our world, and life itself." – Paul Tripp (1950-Present), *Do You Believe?*, 130-31

III. Biblical Terminology and Understanding for God's Decrees

- "Counsel" (Job 38:2; Pr. 33:11; Eph. 3:11; Is. 46:10)
- "Purpose" (Is. 14:26; 46:10; Eph. 3:11; 2 Tim. 1:9; Heb. 6:17; Pr. 30:32; Jer. 4:28; 51:12)
- "Determine" (Lk. 22:22)
- "Predestine" (Acts 4:28; Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 1:5, 11)
- "Destine" (1 Thess. 3:3; 5:9; 1 Pt. 2:8)
- "Ordain" (2 Sam. 17:14; 2 Cor. 22:7; Ps. 44:4; Is. 26:12; Hab. 1:12)
- "Will" (Is. 53:10; Dan. 4:35)
- "Appoint" (Job. 23:13-14)

Isaiah 42:8-11, "Remember this and stand firm,
recall it to mind, you transgressors,
⁹ remember the former things of old;
for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
¹⁰ **declaring** the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, 'My **counsel** shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my **purpose**,'
¹¹ calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man of my counsel from a far country.
I have **spoken**, and I will **bring it to pass**;
I have **purposed**, and I will **do it**."

Job 23:13-14, But he [i.e., God] is unchangeable, and who can turn him back?
What **he desires**, that **he does**.
¹⁴ For he will complete **what he appoints** for me,
and many such things are in his mind.

Daniel 4:34-35, ³⁴ At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven,
and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him
who lives forever,
for his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
³⁵ all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does **according to his will** among the host of heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;
and none can stay his hand
or say to him, "What have you done?"

Acts 17:24-27, ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having **determined** allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Job 14:5, Since his days are **determined**,
and the number of his months is with you,
and you have **appointed** his limits that he cannot pass.

Psalms 139:16, ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were **formed** for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

Genesis 50:15-20, ¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." ¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, **you meant evil** against me, but **God meant it for good**, to **bring it about** that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

Ephesians 1:3-14, ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as **he chose us** in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ **he predestined us for adoption** to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to **the purpose of his will**, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us **the mystery of his will**, according to **his purpose**, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as **a plan** for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been **predestined** according to **the purpose** of him who works all things according to **the counsel of his will**, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

John 17:1-4, When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

Acts 2:22-24, ²² “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— ²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

Acts 4:24-29, ²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

“‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?
²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.

IV. How Should We Approach This Doctrine?

“The way you answer this question shapes the way you interpret your world, directs the way you live, and determines the nature of your hope and peace of heart.” – Paul Tripp (1950-Present), *Do You Believe?*, 130

“If you really do believe that your world is not out of control or driven by fate or chance [sic], but rather that it is under the careful control of one who is the definition of power, wisdom, and love, then you will live with a peace of heart, a confidence, and a hope that you could find no better way... Much of our regular anxiety, worry, fear, and discouragement is the result of thinking that when things are out of *our* control, then they are out of *control*.” – Paul Tripp (1950-Present), *Do You Believe?*, 142

“This doctrine gives us unspeakable comfort since it teaches us that nothing can happen to us by chance but only by the arrangement of our gracious heavenly Father, who watches over us with fatherly care, sustaining all creatures under his lordship, so that not one of the hairs on our heads (for they are all numbered) nor even a little bird can fall to the ground without the will of our Father.” – Belgic Confession (1560), Article 13

WCF 3.8, The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, so that men, seeking to know the will of God revealed in his word, and yielding obedience to it, may, from the certainty of their effectual calling, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine bring praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all who sincerely obey the gospel.

V. God’s Decrees—A Systematic Answer

WSC Q. 7. *What are the decrees of God?*

A. 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.

WCF 3.1, 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.

WCF 3.2, 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.

The Nature of God’s Decrees...

A. Eternal (Eph. 1:4; 3:11; 2 Tim. 1:9)

Ephesians 1:4, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

Ephesians 3:11, This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord...

2 Timothy 1:9, [God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began...

B. Immutable/Unchangeable (Heb. 6:17-18; Job 23:13-14; Ps. 33:11; Is. 46:10; Lk. 22:22; Dan. 4:35)

Hebrews 6:17-18, ¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

Job 23:13-14, But he [i.e., God] is unchangeable, and who can turn him back?

What he desires, that he does.

¹⁴ For he will complete what he appoints for me,
and many such things are in his mind.

Psalms 33:11, The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations.

C. Comprehensive (“all his creatures and all their actions”)

1. Every creature: From the kings and nations of the earth (Acts 4:27-28; Hab. 1:12; Prov. 21:1) to a blade of grass or a tiny bird (Matt. 6:25-33; 10:29-31); every creature (Ps. 145:15-17)
2. Every event: Big events like wars, droughts, famines (Hab. 1:12; 1 Kgs. 17:1-7; 2 Sam. 21:1), the rising and falling of kings and kingdoms (Dan. 2:21; Rom. 13:1; Prov. 21:1) to small things like the roll of the dice (Prov. 16:33), the location of where people live (Acts 17:26), and how long we live (Job 14:5; Mt. 6:27; Ps. 139:16)

Proverbs 21:1, The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.

Proverbs 16:33, The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

Acts 17:26, And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.

Psalms 139:16, in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

D. Unconditional (“according to the purpose of his will”; Rom. 9:11-13)

WCF 3.2, Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet he has not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.

Romans 9:11-13, Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— ¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” ¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

The only final *reason* (basis) why God decrees what he does is his own wisdom and pleasure and his own good purposes. This does not preclude the fact that God is dynamic, he often makes his actions contingent upon the actions of people and nations.

Jeremiah 18:5-10, ⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. ⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. (cf. Jonah 3:4,10)

E. All Wise (*cause/reason*; Eph. 1:11; Rom. 11:33-34; cf. John 17:1-10)

Ephesians 1:11, In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.

Romans 11:33-34, ³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”

F. For His Own Glory (*end/purpose*; Eph. 1:6, 12, 14)

If we wonder why God chose to do this and not that, or do something in this way and not that way, we must admit that he has revealed precious little to us on answers to those kinds of questions.

However, he has told us the *origin* of those decisions—the all-wise counsel of his own will—and he has told us the *ultimate purpose* of all those decisions—his glory. We need to be very careful that we don't pretend to know answers to those questions that God has not revealed to us (Deut. 29:29) but we should also never say that there are no reasons—making God's decisions, that greatly affect us and those we love, seem arbitrary.

G. All Good (this is the first of the *fences* or *caveats* in WCF 3.1)

We must never think of God as the author of evil.

Psalms 92:15, The LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

James 1:13, Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.

1 John 1:5, This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

Genesis 50:20, As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

WCF 3.1, 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.

Belgic Confession, Article 13, “... nevertheless, God neither is the author of, nor can be charged with, the sins which are committed. For His power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible, that He orders and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even then when devils and wicked men act unjustly.”

Canons of Dort, 1.15, “And this is the decree of reprobation, which does not at all make God the author of sin (a blasphemous thought!) but rather its fearful, irreproachable, just judge and avenger.”

“That most vile and blasphemous assertion whereby God is avowed to be the Author of sin has hitherto by the general consent of Christian teachers and writers, both ancient and modern (and these as well Papists as Protestants) been not disclaimed only, but even detested and abhorred...” – “A Short Declaration of the Westminster Assembly” (1645)

WCF 5.4, The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.

God’s relationship to evil events and his relationship to good events are not the same. They are asymmetrical.

Lamentations 3:31-33, For the Lord will not
cast off forever,
³²for, though he cause grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
³³for he does not afflict from his heart
or grieve the children of men.

Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) and Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) both called God's acts of mercy his "natural work" and his acts of punishment his "strange work."¹

H. Includes Real Secondary Causes (this is the second of the *fences* or *caveats* in WCF 3.1; Prov. 16:33; Matt. 17:12; Jn. 19:11; Acts 2:23; Acts 4:27-28; Judges 14:1-4; 2 Kings 12:15)

WCF 3.1, 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.

WCF 5.2, Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

WCF 5.3, God, in his ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.

A. Example: Rain and Sun

Matthew 5:45, ... he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (cf. Zech. 10:1; Job 37:6; Josh. 12:13-14; 1 Kings 18:41-46; Gen. 7:11-24)

Zechariah 10:1, Ask rain from the LORD in the season of the spring rain, from the LORD who makes the storm clouds, and he will give them showers of rain, to everyone the vegetation in the field.

Job 37:6, For to the snow he says, 'Fall on the earth,' likewise to the downpour, his mighty downpour.

But the water cycle and the rotation and revolution of the earth are still true.

¹ Goodwin cites Is. 28:21 for that second term and Edwards cites Hos. 11:8 for this idea. A good summary of this can be found in Dane Ortlund, *Gentle & Lowly* (Crossway, 2020), chapter 15, "His 'Natural' Work and His 'Strange' Work."

Joshua 12:13-14, The sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day. ¹⁴ There has been no day like it before or since.

1 Kings 18:41-46 (Elijah, no rain 3 years, pray for rain); Genesis 7:11-24 (Noah – rain 40 days)

B. Concurrence (Latin, *concursus*)

The meaning of “concurrence” is to run together. Generally, this refers to the fact that there is a “natural” causality that we see, but that does not threaten the divine causality of God. Specifically, it refers to the “simultaneous-ness” of divine agency and human agency in specific actions and events. This is also referred to as “compatibilism.”

Acts 2:22-24, ²² “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— ²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

Genesis 50:20, As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

Canons of Dort, 3/4.16, ... this divine grace of regeneration does not act in people as if they were blocks and stones; nor does it abolish the will and its properties or coerce a reluctant will by force...

C. Prayer

“Prayer is more than a therapeutic catharsis—venting our fears and frustrations or expressing our hopes and dreams to one who cares but is incapable of overruling in the affairs of free creatures. Prayer presupposes that God is sovereign over every contingency of nature and history.” – Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 357

D. Evangelism

God uses our prayers and our feeble words to accomplish his purpose. But he has chosen to use those prayers and words—they are not superfluous or unnecessary.

“What, then, are we to say about the suggestion that a hearty faith in the absolute sovereignty of God is inimical to evangelism? We are bound to say that anyone who makes this suggestion thereby shows that he has simply failed to understand what the doctrine of divine sovereignty means. Not only does it undergird evangelism,

and uphold the evangelist, by creating a hope of success that could not otherwise be entertained; it also teaches us to bind together preaching and prayer; and as it makes us bold and confident before men, so it makes us humble and importunate before God.” – J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*

VI. How we should use this doctrine

A. Praise (Eph. 1:3-14; Ps. 145:14-20)

B. Trust

i. Lack of worry; Contentment (Matt. 6:25-34; Rom. 8:28-30; HC 1)

C. Not Flippant or Presumptive Interpretation (see Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way”)

D. Action

i. Prayer

ii. Evangelism

“Whatever My God Ordains Is Right”

(orig. words by Samuel Rodigast 1676, alt. words by Mark Altrogge)

Whatever my God ordains is right
In His love I am abiding
I will be still in all He does
And follow where He is guiding
He is my God, though dark my road
He holds me that I shall not fall
And so to Him I leave it all

Whatever my God ordains is right
He never will deceive me
He leads me by the proper path
I know He will not leave me
I take content, what He has sent
His hand can turn my griefs away
And patiently I wait His day

Whatever my God ordains is right
Here shall my stand be taken
Though sorrow, or need, or death be mine
Yet I am not forsaken
My Father’s care circles me there
He holds me that I shall not fall
And so to Him I leave it all

Whatever my God ordains is right
Though now this cup in drinking
Bitter it seems to my faint heart
I take it all unshrinking

My God is true, each morn anew
Sweet comfort yet shall fill my heart
And pain and sorrow shall depart

“God Moves In a Mysterious Way” by William Cowper (1774)

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform.
He plants his footsteps on the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints fresh courage take,
The clouds you so much dread,
Are big with mercy, and shall break,
With blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace.
Behind a frowning providence,
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour.
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain.
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

Discussion Questions

- **Inward Application:** God has incorporated your prayers into his eternal and perfect plan. How does that affect the way you pray and whether you pray? See Matthew 7:7-11 and 6:8 as an example of the Lord commanding us to engage in the asking even though he already knows what we need.
- **Outward Application:** God calls us to evangelize, but we know it is not in our hands ultimately. How does our discussion of God’s decree help you think about your task in evangelism?
- **Basic Understanding:** Clarifying questions.
- **Further Understanding:** How have you talked about God’s sovereignty in the past that you might adjust if you were to explain it today? Why does nuance matter in this?
- **Reading Scripture:** Matthew 11:25-30