

TEACHING THROUGH THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Chapter 3: Of God's Eternal Decree

LESSON 005

TEACHER NOTES

REVIEW FROM PREVIOUS LESSON

God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. Moreover, there is one God and there are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. Much of this is beyond our ability to understand, but has, none the less, been made clear in the scriptures.

God's Sovereign Decree (WCF 3.1-2)

TEACHING NOTE

God is absolutely sovereign over all things. The confession does not present a universe with cold, mechanical rules, but a deeply personal, logical, and good plan ordained by a loving Father. It is a delicate and mysterious balance: God ordains all things, yet humans are not robots. God is in control and yet God has left our wills free. This should give us incredible comfort.

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...

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 3.1-2

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.
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.

TEACHING CONTENT

God is God: It is a necessary part of the character of God that He controls all things. If He didn't, He wouldn't be God. So we affirm that God has commanded and ordained all things, not just salvation but every hair on your head and every movement of every atom. He made this plan completely freely, without any outside influence or necessity. When we think of choices we always think of them from a human perspective where even our most free choices are constrained by our circumstances: to choose between chocolate and vanilla ice cream requires being in a place where someone has made chocolate and vanilla ice cream available for us. God is constrained by nothing and has determined from before time or creation to save some. (Isaiah 46:9–10, Matthew 10:29–30, Romans 9:15–18)

He Has Left Us Free: We are not robots, or cogs in a big machine, mechanically doing the things that we were designed to do and nothing else. God has left us free. It is a truth beyond our comprehension that even though God is sovereignly in control of absolutely everything, He is able to create a world where people are none the less free to choose. Which means that man, not God, is the author of sin, for it is our first father Adam who rebelled against God's stated will. (Genesis 3:6, Ecclesiastes 7:29, James 1:13–14, Acts 2:23)

God's Unconditional Decree: We have to keep something in balance here. Man is free to choose, but God is still sovereign and so God's decrees are not based on man's choices. All of our choices are free and yet dependent on our circumstances and limitations. God has no limitations and no circumstances in the way that we would understand them. He stands above and before creation, having complete freedom from it and complete authority over it. God doesn't look into the future to see who will choose Him, and then decree their salvation based on that foresight. Rather, the future exists exactly because God has decreed it. (Romans 9:11–13, 2 Timothy 1:9, Ephesians 1:4–5)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Many people try to protect human free will by saying, “God just looked into the future, saw what we would choose, and then decreed it based on our choices.” Why does the Confession so strongly reject this idea?**

It rejects this because it makes God dependent on the actions of His creatures, which would mean God is not God. Only God's freedom is absolutely, so His choices must be fully and totally free. Indeed, by definition nothing is certain UNLESS God decrees it, it is He who makes the future the future.

- **A common objection to God's absolute sovereignty is that it makes humans into mere “robots.” But the Confession makes clear that “violence is not offered to the will of the creatures,” how would you explain this to someone?**

God does not force us to act against our will; rather, we voluntarily choose to do exactly what we most desire in that moment. Our choices are genuine and have real consequences, even while they perfectly fulfill God's overarching plan. This is both clear to those the Spirit has revealed it to, and a tremendous mystery. We can understand intuitively how this works, but it is beyond our intellect to grasp.

- **The Confession teaches that our genuine choices are not taken away. How does this encourage us to still make wise choices, share the gospel, and pray, rather than just being passive?**

God ordains the final outcome, and the *means* to achieve that outcome. So for example, if He chooses to save someone He also ordains that specific people at specific times should pray for that person, invite them to church, pastors should preach the gospel to them. God uses means to achieve His ends and we are commanded to obey within that framework.

- **Why is it so crucial for our faith and our view of God's character to maintain that while God ordains everything, He is absolutely *not* the author of sin?**

If God were the author of sin, He could not be a perfectly holy and just judge. This again is a great mystery to us that God ordains all things and yet the responsibility for the existence of sin truly doesn't lay at God's feet but at our feet. God left man free and we freely chose sin. If it were any other way then God would not be good and God would not be sovereign.

- If God has ordained whatsoever comes to pass, why are we still held morally responsible for our sins?

We are held responsible because we sin by choice, acting according to our own corrupted desires without being externally coerced by God. This includes the true freedom of Adam's first sin and also the constrained choices of our own sins after the fall.

The Particulars of Predestination (WCF 3.3-5)

TEACHING NOTE

God, from eternity past, and for His own glory selected exactly which men and which angels would be saved and which would suffer the eternal consequences of that sin. It's a little bit hard for us to comprehend but the entire citizenship of heaven and hell were fixed in God on the basis this decision from all eternity. As a result, not a single person will be lost who should be saved, or shown mercy who has not been elected unto mercy. The mechanism for all of this is faith in Christ, either faith that looks forward to a coming Messiah as the saints of old, or a faith that clings fast to Christ as He has been revealed in the New Testament. There really are just two options, life or death. Faith in Christ or Hell.

Romans 8:29–30 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

- By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death.
- These angels and men, thus predestinated and fore-ordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it can not be either increased or diminished.
- Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

TEACHING CONTENT

Angels and Men: The subjects of God's eternal decree of predestination include both human beings and angels. Some angels are elect, and so God preserved them from ever being tainted by sin, while others fell into sin by their own decision and deserve eternal destruction. The situation with humans is slightly more complicated because our first federal head chose sin on our behalf and so men need not just to be kept from further sin, but to be saved from the root of their sin. Yet, the decree of election is the same. God chose to save some angels and men and to damn others for their sins, and sovereign ordained all means to accomplish that end. (1 Timothy 5:21, Jude 6, Romans 9:22–23, Ephesians 1:4–5)

Predestined Unto Life: Predestination or election is decision from all eternity to save specific people and angels. It was not a general decree to offer salvation to such as would accept it, but a specific decree to save particular people. In the same way that every hair on our head is numbered and not one can fall from our heads without it being God's sovereign will, so each and every one of who has been elect will be doggedly pursued by our Lord, our objections overcome, our hearts transformed, and we will respond with genuine and personal faith. Not because God has seen that we will respond in faith, but rather because we are elect God ordains all of the means that will cause us to respond freely in faith. (Acts 13:48, Romans 8:29–30, Ephesians 1:4–5)

Passed Over for Death: Often called reprobation, this is God's sovereign decision from eternity to pass by, or refrain from saving, the non-elect, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin. Reformed theology distinguishes two aspects of this decree: God passes by them and condemns them. God passes them by through withholding the free gift of saving grace. Condemnation is God's judicial determination to punish them on the ground of their own actual sin and guilt. Salvation is an expression of God's free and unmerited mercy, while condemnation is an expression of His justice and holiness; both are good and give glory to God. (Romans 9:17–22, 1 Peter 2:8, Jude 4)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **The Confession says that the number of the elect and non-elect is “so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished.” Is this comforting or scary?**

It should give us comfort because our salvation is entirely secure in God's hands. It does not depend on us in the least, but on the unchangeable decree of an almighty God who promises that no one can snatch us out of His hand.

- **God saves us without reference to our works, why is it vital to preserve this unconditional nature of grace?**

If election were conditional on our foreseen faith or good works, salvation would ultimately be based on our merit or cooperation. This would be death for us: an impossible hurdle for those still dead in their sins to overcome and an awful burden for the believer to struggle under. The good news of the gospel is that Christ loved us and died for us while we were still unlovely.

- **What would you say to someone who said that God's eternal decree is unjust?**
- **God is God and we are not. Whatever he does is just, by definition, because he defines justice. There is a time when we need to just stop talking, be still and accept from His hand what He gives.**
- **But more than that, remembering that we are dead in our sins, no one deserves mercy. It would be like receiving a birthday present from your grandparents and then getting upset that your grandparents didn't buy the same thing for everyone in your school. God's plan is good, just, and to the praise of His glorious Name.**

References — Chapter 3

– Monergism, *WCF Study Guide 3.1-3.2 - The Eternal Plan of God*

www.monergism.com/eternal-plan-god-wcf-31-32

– Monergism, *WCF Study Guide 3.3-3.5 - Predestination and Foreordination*

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– Monergism, *WCF Study Guide 3.6 - Order of Salvation*

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– Monergism, *WCF Study Guide 3.7-3.8 - Sovereign Reprobation*

www.monergism.com/sovereign-reprobation-wcf-37-38

Glossary — Chapter 3

Angels and Men —The rational created beings who are the subjects of God's eternal decree of predestination. In Reformed theology, God's sovereign plan extends beyond the human race to include the angelic realm: some angels are elected and preserved in their holy state, while others are permitted to fall and are foreordained to everlasting punishment. This underscores the total scope of God's cosmic governance.

Confession —The public declaration or formal written summary of biblical doctrines and convictions held by believers and the church.

Election —God's sovereign choice from eternity to save certain individuals, not based on anything foreseen in them but solely on His good pleasure and free grace.

Grace —God's unmerited favor toward sinners; His free gift of salvation and divine enablement that cannot be earned or deserved.

Heaven —The dwelling place of God, where believers upon death enter into the conscious presence of Christ and enjoy the full experience of His glory.

Immutable —Unchangeable in His being, perfections, purposes, and promises. God neither grows nor diminishes, neither learns nor forgets, neither improves nor decays, for He is already and eternally perfect. His immutability is the ground of all confidence in His Word, since what He has decreed and promised can never alter.

Passed Over for Death —Also termed reprobation or preterition, this refers to God's sovereign decision, according to His unsearchable counsel, to pass by the non-elect in the distribution of saving grace and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sins. In Westminster theology, this act manifests God's absolute sovereignty and holy justice, ensuring that while salvation is an act of pure mercy, condemnation is a righteous judgment for human rebellion.

Predestination —God's eternal decree determining all that comes to pass, particularly regarding the eternal destiny of men and angels in election and reprobation.

Predestined Unto Life —Also known as election, this is God's eternal, unchangeable, and unconditional choice of certain individuals to be saved and brought to everlasting glory. This decree is made before the foundation of the world, out of God's mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, good works, or perseverance in the creature as a condition or cause, and is executed through all the necessary means of salvation (redemption, calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, and preservation).

Reformed —The theological tradition emerging from the Protestant Reformation, characterized by a commitment to God's absolute sovereignty in salvation, covenant theology, and confessional standards.

Westminster Confession of Faith —The 1647 Reformed doctrinal standard and subordinate summary of faith produced for Presbyterian churches.



LESSON CONTENT



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