

TEACHING THROUGH THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Chapter 3: Of God's Eternal Decree

LESSON 006

TEACHER NOTES

REVIEW FROM PREVIOUS LESSON

God has eternally and sovereignly ordained everything that comes to pass without being the author of sin or destroying human freedom. Out of His unmerited grace, He unconditionally elected some to everlasting life while passing over others to face the just consequences of their own sins. This is meant to give us deep comfort and assurance, reminding us that our salvation rests entirely and securely in God's hands rather than our own.

The Means of Salvation

TEACHING NOTE

Just as God has specifically chosen His elect, so He has ordered the specific historical means He will use to accomplish that salvation. Christ did not die in order to make salvation possible, but in order to actually save specific men and women. What God has willed, He brings about.

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. Romans 10:14-17

- As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, fore-ordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

TEACHING CONTENT

- **God Uses Means:** It belongs to the character of God to use means. He doesn't just make nuts, He makes the tree, the squirrels, and the forest for the nuts to exist logically and naturally within. He is a master craftsman who desires things to be in context so that they can be sustained and beautiful. As a result what He has willed from eternity past He has ordained all of the means for that to actually come to fruition in the course of history. It was always His plan that He should bring about our salvation through Jesus Christ. He knew we would be weak and wanting, so He sent His Spirit to work in us and preserve us. God brings about our redemption, justification, adoption, sanctification, and preservation because all of us NEED all of those divine blessings for salvation. (Acts 27:22–31, Genesis 50:20, Acts 2:23, Philippians 2:12–13, Genesis 1:11–12)

- **No Mistakes:** The God who has the hairs on our heads numbered doesn't miss anything. Anyone He has ordained from eternity will be saved in the course of history through ordinary means and anyone who is not elect will not receive that blessing. No matter how many times you go to church, sit under the Word, partake of the sacraments, salvation belongs to the Lord and He alone works the things necessary in the heart to save men from their sins. Remember, Christ did not die in order to make salvation possible, but in order to actually save His elect. Without that work there is no salvation and so exposure to the same means does not guarantee salvation. Yet, we should still expect God to meet us through the ordinary means as they are His specific channels to bless us and effect His desired end. (Matthew 10:29–31, John 6:37–39, 2 Corinthians 2:15–16, Matt 7:21–23)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **How does God save people?**

Through means. He brings to bear all of the ordinary things in a situation that usually save people and through His sovereign power they work. In other words, He uses the preaching of pastors, the shepherding of elders, the invitations of friends, the testimony of fathers and mothers, the reading of the Word and prayer and the Spirit applies those things to the heart and makes them effectual. The Spirit works to quicken the heart, but the Spirit uses means, people aren't usually saved by bolts of lightning from the sky, but by God providentially bringing about the ordinary things that He uses to save them.

- **Why doesn't hearing preaching and going to church have the same effect on everyone?**

In order for the ordinary means to have any effectiveness the individual concerned needs to be effectually called by God and it needs to be God's will to bring about their conversion at that stage in their lives. Without the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart to open the eyes and give new life even the correct ordinary means won't have any lasting impact.

- **How would you respond to someone who says "God is sovereign, so anyone He wants to save WILL BE SAVED, so I don't need to share my faith with anyone."**

God is sovereign and has commanded you to share your faith, "...always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect..." (1 Peter 3:15). Moreover, God in His sovereignty has ordained that people are ordinarily saved through means and so He has willed to use your prayers, your conversations, the testimony of your life, and your invitations to church as part of His larger plan to gather His sheep to Himself. And it is also part of His plan to transform you more and more into the image of Christ.

- **If all of this is true, why does God not take believers to glory immediately when they are saved?**

Because He has willed to use them as tools and means in the salvation of others! God's plan is not just to save individuals but to unite a people to Himself in Christ such that they have communion with one another in Him. As such, He has made this beautiful plan to use ordinary believers living ordinary lives to bring about the extraordinary end of filling up the New Heavens and New Earth with righteous believers.

- **How should the biblical truth that Christ died to *actually* save His people, rather than merely make salvation a general possibility, bring us comfort?**

It means that it rests ENTIRELY upon Him. That He has accomplished it and will bring to fruition the purpose He shed His blood for. There is no doubt. No possibility for any of the elect to be missed, lost, or forgotten about. Our faith is weak, we are weak, but He is strong.

Passed By Unto Death

TEACHING NOTE

God doesn't have to show mercy to anyone, but when He does it is His own free, unmerited, and gracious decision not based on anything in the creature. God's choice to save is sovereign, unearned favor and mercy; His choice to not save is righteous justice and judicial wrath. He does not treat the non-elect with malice, but with exact and fair holiness in view of their guilt. But both choices are fundamentally good because God is Good. This means that for those ordained to Hell he first passes them over and chooses not to extend His grace and then in the course of time men and women are not condemned generally as sinners but specifically for their exact sins, both inherited and actual.

For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory... Romans 9:15-23

- The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.

TEACHING CONTENT

God is Sovereign: Reprobation, or God passing by, means that God has willed not to extend mercy and grace to those whom He passed by. Fundamental to understanding this is remembering that God is absolutely sovereign and bound by nothing external to Himself. He does not pass by some because He saw that they would be particularly wicked, or that they would refuse His grace, or for any other reason except that He chose to pass them by. His choice is rooted in His own sovereign character. (Proverbs 16:4, Romans 9:15-22, 1 Peter 2:8)

Passing By: For God to pass by a creature means that He is willing, from eternity past, not to extend the mercy of Christ's death to them. This does not mean they will never hear the gospel, but that the Holy Spirit will never give them the ears to hear it, the heart to believe it, and the lips to confess it. The gospel will remain a dead and lifeless thing for them because God has refused to give to them grace to understand. This does not mean the gospel is a dead and lifeless thing, but they themselves are unable to hear it rightly. For this to make sense you have to remember that none of us deserve mercy. We all deserve death, but God showing mercy to some does not oblige Him to show mercy to all. Grace is gracious not universal. (Matthew 11:25-26, Matthew 13:11-15, Romans 11:7-8)

Actively Condemning: God sovereignly ordains the judgment and justice of Hell. No one is in Hell without God willing it, but because of the way God created and sustained the world, there is no one in Hell who doesn't deserve to be there. We are free, rational creatures and those whom God chooses to pass by do, in the course of the history, actually choose sin. So to say that God ordains them to judgment does not mean that God is morally culpable in damning them, because God is not the author of their sins. God does not force anyone to sin against their will, but rather ordains that man will freely choose to sin based on their internal character and logic. This also means that there is a great and beautiful justice in that men and women are not condemned generally as sinners but specifically for their exact sins, both inherited and actual. Without a savior they were born dead in sin, but throughout the course of their life they actively chose to commit more sins. It is on the basis of that sin that they are condemned. (Romans 2:5-8, Romans 9:22-24, James 1:13-14, Jude 1:4)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **What is the difference between God “passing by” someone and God “condemning” someone?**

Passing by is God choosing, based on nothing foreseen in the creature, to not extend mercy to them.
Condemning is judging them on the basis of their individual real and inherited sins.

- **Why is it impossible to accuse God of being “unfair” or “unjust” when He withholds saving mercy from some?**

Because no one deserves grace! All grace is gracious, unmerited, unearned, and freely given. God is not obligated to save any, which is why it is so miraculously kind that He saved some!

- **When the non-elect reject the gospel, why do they do so? Are they forced against their will?**

No, they are not forced against their will. They do reject the gospel because they do not want the gospel or to submit to God.

- **Why do we preach the gospel to anyone who can hear it if only the elect are made able to believe?**

Because God saves people through means. If we were only to preach the gospel to those who would be saved it would require us to have a definite revelation from God about who would be saved. But what God wills is that the seed be scattered far and wide so that He can give growth where He wills. It is a beautiful thing that we can be used by the living God for the advance of His kingdom.

- **How does this doctrine eliminate every ground for Christian boasting?**

Neither salvation nor damnation rests on anything we could do. We are not better than the damned, God just chose to love us. Because it rests fully and completely on His sovereign choice, what is there to boast about? What did you do except receive freely given grace?

- **What is the ultimate purpose of both the salvation of the elect and the condemnation of the reprobate?**

The glory of God. Saving some magnifies God's grace, goodness, and mercy. Damning the rest shows forth God's holiness, justice, and power. God is God and we are not so everything He does is good.

Predestination - A Balm, not a Cudgel

TEACHING NOTE

The Westminster Standards are pastoral. They were written by pastors and theologians that cared deeply about the truth and about their flocks and so 3.8 is more of a statement about how a doctrine ought to be handled rather than about the doctrine itself. Predestination is difficult and complicated, and so we need to handle it with special care. It is true and biblical, so we can't abandon it, and moreover, when predestination is handled rightly, it brings about assurance and praise to God.

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.
Deuteronomy 29:29

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 3.8

8. The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.

TEACHING CONTENT

High Mystery: People have a problem with the doctrine of predestination, because they think it gets rid of their free will and makes them pawns being moved around the board unjustly. It strikes directly at the pride of man. Even those saved by Christ struggle with understanding it because it is a high mystery, directly relating to the heart and mind and plan of God, who is beyond our comprehension. So while it is an essential article of our faith and can be taught profitably to children, it is also a matter that requires maturity and wisdom in teaching and preaching it. (Rom 11:33, Isaiah 55:8-9)

Assurance of Salvation: One of the great blessings of the doctrine of predestination is our ability to have assurance of salvation. When Christ works in our hearts, when we are bearing fruit in keeping with repentance, growing in grace, and living out our faith. Predestination reminds us plainly that it is NOT our own doing. We are saved by grace, through faith, in Christ not on the basis of any works done by us, but by His sovereign election from eternity past. When we stumble and fall, the same is true, our salvation rests entirely and completely on God's sovereign mercy and election from eternity past. The blood of Christ is sufficient because the Lord will sustain the elect in it! (2 Peter 1:10, Romans 8:29-33, Philippians 1:6)

Praise to God: When handled and understood rightly, predestination directly assaults human pride and directs all glory to God alone. It reminds us of how small we are and how worthy of praise God is. (Eph 1:5-6, 2 Thessalonians 2:13).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **The Confession says that this “high mystery of predestination” should be handled with “special prudence and care.” Why is this doctrine different than others?**

Because it affords the believer an opportunity for pride, even though they were chosen, based on nothing foreseen in them, they were still chosen. Think of the Jews of old living awful lives but claiming to be Sons of Abraham. But also this doctrine is most offensive to the unbeliever, and when handled wrongly it will drive men away rather than invite them into God's mercy.

- **Why is the certainty of all these things so comforting?**

Because we know that the promises rest upon God and God alone. It is necessary that we respond in faith and walk in good works, but ultimately we are claimed, converted, and sustained in salvation merely because of God's good pleasure which will never and can never change. Our salvation does not depend upon us, but upon the character of God.

- **WCF 3.8 notes that this doctrine should lead to “humility” and “diligence.” How does absolute predestination promote humility and combat spiritual complacency?**

It promotes humility because we realize we did nothing to earn or prompt God's choice; it was entirely His grace. It combats complacency because true salvation WILL produce good works in us. So we simultaneously know deeply that it does not depend upon us, and yet we can know the truth of God's work in our lives through the fruit that He produces in us.

- **How should we approach doctrines that are difficult for us to understand?**

There is a pattern to the Christian life. First, we trust God, we confess the truth, and then we grow in understanding of it. There are many things in scripture that even after thousands of years in heaven we will still be growing in our understanding of.

- **How does the truth of election lead us to praise God?**

God is god and we are not. But our God, unlike us, is merciful, just, good, and kind. When we look at our state rightly and look at what He has freely chosen to do for us through Christ, there can be no other response but praise.

References — Chapter 3

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Glossary — Chapter 3

Adoption —An act of God's free grace, whereby believers are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of, the sons of God.

Assurance of Salvation —The subjective certainty, wrought by the Holy Spirit, that a believer is in a state of grace and eternally elected to life. According to the Westminster Standards, this assurance is not a matter of guessing at the secret will of God, but is drawn from the objective promises of scripture, the witness of the Holy Spirit, and the observable fruit of one's effectual calling (faith, repentance, and sincere obedience).

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

Doctrine —The body of authoritative biblical teachings and foundational principles of the Christian faith.

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.

High Mystery —The designation given by the Confession to the doctrine of predestination, indicating that it is a profound truth of God that transcends human comprehension and must be approached with "special prudence and care." Rather than a subject for speculative debate or philosophical speculation, this high mystery is intended to produce humility, diligence, praise, and comfort when handled in accordance with the revealed Word of God.

Holy Spirit —The third person of the Trinity, eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son, who applies redemption through regeneration, indwells believers, and sanctifies them progressively.

Justification —An act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

Ordinary Means of Grace —The primary outward instruments ordained by God—principally the Word, sacraments, and prayer—through which the Holy Spirit works salvation and spiritual growth in believers.

Praise to God —The ultimate end and purpose of all of God's decrees, particularly the predestination of the elect to everlasting life. This doctrine is designed to strip human beings of all pride and boasting, leading them instead to a state of profound gratitude, worship, and admiration of God's free grace, mercy, and unchangeable love in Christ Jesus.

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

Preservation —Despite centuries of hand-copying across thousands of manuscripts (transmission), God in His providence has kept His Word pure and intact. Minor variations exist between manuscripts, but none affect any doctrine of the faith. The church today possesses an abundance of manuscript evidence, far more than any other ancient document, giving us every confidence that we know what the original texts said. God did not inspire His Word only to lose it. He who gave us Scripture has faithfully kept it.

Repentance —An evangelical grace wherein a sinner, with true grief and hatred of sin, turns from sin to God with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.

Sacrament —A visible sign and seal of invisible grace, instituted by Christ to represent Him and His benefits and confirm our faith. In the New Testament, these are Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Sanctification —The work of God's free grace, whereby believers are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.

Sanctified Wisdom —Scripture does not answer every practical question the church will face. For matters the Bible leaves open, church officers are called to apply their knowledge of the Word, their God-given wisdom, and their care for their congregation to make faithful decisions. These decisions are not binding declarations and must always remain subject to Scripture.

Spirit —A being without body or material parts, immaterial and invisible. To confess God as "a most pure spirit" affirms that He has no physical form and is not composed of parts, but is simple, whole, and undivided in His being. As spirit, He is present everywhere and is perceived not by the senses but known through His revelation.

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



LESSON CONTENT



MONERGISM STUDY GUIDE