

Romans (46) Predestination

Last Lord's Day we began to consider the purpose of God that He has for His people, a purpose that He had planned from eternity and in eternity had decreed would come to pass in history in the lives of His elect--His chosen people. In Romans 8:28 Paul mentioned God's "purpose"; in Romans 8:29 and 30 Paul explained the nature and details of God's "purpose." Here Paul identified God's five major acts of grace that God works on behalf of His people. Of these five, two occurred before creation, two occur during the lifetime of His elect, and the fifth will take place on the last day, upon our resurrection. Paul was attempting to assure his readers that God will most certainly accomplish His purpose in saving them and giving them a glorious eternal destiny, for we read:

²⁹For 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. ³⁰And those whom He predestined He also *called*, and those whom He called He also *justified*, and those whom he justified he also *glorified*. (Rom. 8:29f)

Last Lord's Day we considered the truth that God *foreknew* His people in eternity. God from eternity *knew His people* in a relational sense. The best understanding of the word and idea of "foreknowledge" is *God's covenantal and eternal love that He has for His elect*. For God to foreknow people is to love them from eternity, even before the foundation of the world. For God to foreknow His people does not speak of God knowing *about* them from eternity, but of His having known *them* from eternity.

The second act of God's grace toward His people is His *predestination* of them to become all that He has purposed for them. Paul wrote, "For those whom He foreknew He also *predestined*." Predestination was preceded by God's love-- For those whom He *foreknew* He also predestined. We want to consider today this matter of God having predestined His people.

But before we address this subject of predestination, let us consider Paul's language in Ephesians 1 through which he shows that God's foreknowledge of His people is indeed God's love manifested for them in eternity. We read in Ephesians 1:3ff:

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, ⁴even 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 as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, ⁶to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved. (Eph. 1:3-6)

In Romans 8:29 we read that those God *foreknew* He predestinated; here in Ephesians 1:4f we read that "in *love* He predestinated us for adoption as sons." For God to foreknow someone is to state that God had set his love upon him from eternity.

Now in order for us to better understand what the Bible teaches regarding predestination, we should distinguish it from several other terms that describe the manner in which God interacts with and governs His world. *First, let us distinguish between God's election of sinners unto salvation and God's predestination of His elect unto salvation*. We read in 1 Peter 1:1ff of another occasion in which God's foreknowledge and His purpose in grace for His people. Peter wrote:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are *elect* exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ²*according to the foreknowledge of God the Father*, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

Here we read of the *election* unto salvation of people by God the Father according to His *foreknowledge*. In Romans 8:29 we read of God having *predestined* His people according to His *foreknowledge*. Commonly when people speak of God's election and predestination they use these terms as though they were synonymous, that they mean they same thing. But this is not correct, biblically. To be precise, election speaks of God's choice as to who would be His people; predestination speaks to the purpose for which God had chosen them.

Secondly, we should not equate predestination of His people with God's decrees from eternity respecting what would come to pass in history. In other words, some use the word predestination to describe all of God's decrees, that is, of all events that God has ordained would transpire in the history of the world. They speak of predestination in the sense that God has predestined all things to take place in history. In one sense this is not "wrong", for theologians have done this commonly. For example, **J. I. Packer** equates election and predestination in his book entitled, *Concise Theology*.

Predestination is a word often used to signify God's foreordaining of all the events of world history, past, present, and future, and this usage is quite appropriate.¹

Now it is true that God as ordered all things that take place in history, but to use the term predestination to describe God's sovereign control over all of history is to use the word in a manner not used in the Word of God. When we look at the use of the word predestination in Scripture, we must allow the context to determine the precise meaning of the word. *Predestination has to do with God's original purpose for His elect to save them from their sins and to glorify them in eternity.* God predestinated His elect unto their final and full stature as His adopted children. Predestination, therefore, may be regarded as but one of God's decrees that God made in eternity; it is not to be equated with all of God's decrees. And so, when we speak of God's decrees, we are referring to matters much more broad and extensive than predestination. God's decrees are God's purpose and intention to bring to pass *all events* that take place in history, not just His predestination of His people unto their final glory. God's decrees are much more broad in what they cover than just the predestination of His elect unto their final destiny.

Here is a definition of God's decree(s) from our 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith :

"God hath decreed in Himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established; in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree." (Isaiah 46:10; Ephesians 1:11; Hebrews 6:17; Romans 9:15, 18; James 1:13; 1 John 1:5; Acts 4:27, 28; John 19:11; Numbers 23:19; Ephesians 1:3-5)²

Thirdly, if we are to be precise, we should distinguish between God's decrees and God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty speaks of God's full and absolute control over His creation. God's decrees speak to what purpose or end to which God purposed to govern His creation. **Arthur Pink** wrote of God's sovereignty:

The Sovereignty of God. What do we mean by this expression? We mean the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the god-hood of God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Most High, doing according to His will in the army of Heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, so that none can stay His hand or say unto Him what doest Thou? (Dan. 4:35). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in Heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will (Psa. 115:3). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is "The Governor among the nations" (Psa. 22:28), setting up kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the "Only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15). Such is the God of the Bible.³

¹ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), p. 38. But then Packer immediately shows that biblically predestination speaks of God's decision in eternity respecting the final destiny of all individuals.

² Article 3, paragraph 1, 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith.

³ Arthur Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Baker Book House, 1975), pp. 23f.

But when we consider the definition of *God's decrees*, we are speaking of God's purpose or determination for His creation. We are not speaking of His ability and the reality of His control over all things, which is His sovereignty; rather, God's decrees speak of His declaration of what would come to pass in history, reaching from the smallest of incidents to the greatest of events. We may again look to Arthur Pink's definition and description of God's decrees:

The decree of God is His purpose or determination with respect to future things. We have used the singular number as Scripture does (Romans 8:28, Ephesians 3:11), because there was only one act of His infinite mind about future things. But we speak as if there had been many, because our minds are only capable of thinking of successive revolutions, as thoughts and occasions arise, or in reference to the various objects of His decree, which being many seem to us to require a distinct purpose for each one. But an infinite understanding does not proceed by steps, from one stage to another: "Known unto God are all His works, from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18)...

The decrees of God relate to all future things without exception: whatever is done in time, was foreordained before time began. God's purpose was concerned with everything, whether great or small, whether good or evil, although with reference to the latter we must be careful to state that while God is the Orderer and Controller of sin, He is not the Author of it in the same way that He is the Author of good. Sin could not proceed from a holy God by positive and direct creation, but only by decretive permission and negative action. God's decree is as comprehensive as His government, extending to all creatures and all events. It was concerned about our life and death; about our state in time, and our state in eternity. As God works all things after the counsel of His own will, we learn from His works what His counsel is (was), as we judge of an architect's plan by inspecting the building which was erected under his directions.⁴

The Holy Scriptures mention the decrees of God in a number of different ways. In Psalm 2 we read the word *decree* itself. Here the Lord Jesus is speaking prophetically of the Father exalting Him to rule over the world

⁷*I will tell of the decree:* The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. ⁸Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. ⁹You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." (Psa. 2:7-9)

In Ephesians 3:11f God's decree is referred to as His "eternal purpose." There we read that God's wisdom displayed in His dealings with the church "was according to *the eternal purpose* that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him." In Acts 2:23 Peter made mention of God's decree when he spoke of God's "determinate counsel and foreknowledge." Of Christ's crucifixion Peter declared, "Him, being delivered by *the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God*, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death."

Let us consider the nature of God's decree(s). *First, God's decrees are eternal.* God made these determinations in their entirety before His act of creation. He did not decree because of something that happened or would happen in history. His decrees were established before the event of creation.

Second, all of the decrees of God are wise. God has purposed to glorify Himself in all that takes place in history. All of God's decrees were wisely contemplated and established toward this end. "O LORD, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom have You made them all; the earth is full of your creatures (Psa. 104:24).

Third, the decrees of God are free. There was no principle above God that moved God to decree what He had decreed. He was free to decree as He pleased. He was not coerced. There was no external force or influence that led Him to decree what He decreed. He was under no obligation other than to be true to Himself. **Isaiah 40:13** and **14** read:

⁴ Arthur Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 8.

Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or as His counselor has taught Him? With whom did He take counsel, and who instructed Him, and taught Him in the path of justice? Who taught Him knowledge, and showed Him the way of understanding?”

These rhetorical questions demand the answer, “No one and nothing counseled God or moved Him to decree in eternity what would come to pass in history.

Fourth, the decrees of God are absolute and unconditional. The execution of them is absolute. All God’s decree(s) comes to pass. Nothing fails of all of God’s Word and will for His creation. God said, “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure” (Isaiah 46:10).”

And so, **God is unchangeable in His decree.** Listen to **Thomas Watson**, a 17th century Puritan pastor and writer:

God is unchangeable in his decree. What He has decreed from eternity is unalterable. “My counsel shall stand” (Isa. 46: 10). God’s eternal counsel or decree is immutable (that is, unchangeable). If He changed His decree, it must be from some defect of wisdom or foresight, for that is the reason why men change their purposes; they see something after, which they did not see before; but this cannot be the cause why God should alter His decree, because His knowledge is perfect, He sees all things in one entire prospect before Him.

And so, indeed, God is unchangeable in His decree. Before creation God decreed all that would come to pass, including creation.

Consider these verses that speak to God’s eternal decree: **Proverbs 19:21** reads, “There are many plans in a man’s heart, nevertheless the LORD’S counsel-- that will stand.” “Counsel” is another word for God’s decree. It speaks of God’s intentional purpose and plan. There might be many plans in a man’s heart, but it is God’s plan, God’s decree that takes place. **Isaiah 14:24-27** states similarly,

“The LORD of hosts has sworn, saying, ‘Surely, **as I have thought, so it shall come to pass, and as I have purposed, so it shall stand:** ²⁵That I will break the Assyrian in My land, and on My mountains tread him underfoot. Then his yoke shall be removed from them, and his burden removed from their shoulders. ²⁶This is the purpose that is purposed against the whole earth, and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations. ²⁷**For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?**”

In this passage of Isaiah 14 the Lord is pronouncing judgment upon the Assyrian emperor who the Lord used to punish His people. But after He had accomplished His use of Sennacherib, God determined that He would overthrow this man, this Assyrian, in His land. And God declared that this was in His purpose. He had purposed it long before and His purposes would be accomplished. God’s purposes, God’s decrees, are never thwarted; they all come to pass.

We read in **Isaiah 46:9-11:**

“Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, **declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure,’** ¹¹calling a bird of prey from the east, The man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it.”

Here, once again we see God affirming His unalterable decree. He had declared these things from the beginning, even from ancient times, and again, this is before creation, things that were not yet done, nevertheless, He had declared, or had determined in His counsel, “My counsel will stand; I will do all my pleasure.” And this reference of calling a “bird from the east” is a reference to God summoning the emperor whom He was calling to come and punish His people. It was all in the purpose and plan of God. This pagan king was accomplishing God’s

purpose. God had decreed it from the beginning. Of course this king was not aware he was fulfilling God's purposes, but he was because God is sovereign and God's decrees come to pass.

God declared in **Psalm 115:3**, "But our God is in heaven; He does *whatever He pleases*." And whatever He pleases is His counsel, is His decree. Also in **Psalm 135:6** we read, "*Whatever the LORD pleases He does*, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places." In the ancient world the seas were thought to be a chaotic place, unmanageable, uncontrollable, and yet the psalmist asserts that God controls the seas, as well as all things in heaven and earth.

In the next passage we might consider, **Daniel 4:34ff**, we have the confession of Nebuchadnezzar, who was a pagan king. At this time he was the emperor of the greatest kingdom of the age, that was Babylon at this time. He had thought that he himself had caused his rise to power and he thought that his authority was above all in the earth, and therefore God struck him with madness, until he came to understand that it was in God's purposes, it was God's rule, it was due to God's decree that was taking place in history, not Nebuchadnezzar's. And so at the end of this period of judgment we have this confession of Nebuchadnezzar:

"And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding 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 is from generation to generation. ³⁵All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; *He does according to His will* in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. *No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'*" (Daniel 4:34ff).

And so, here, this pagan king acknowledges God's decree.

In **Romans 11:36** Paul described God's wisdom in the ages as He worked within Israel and the Gentiles to bring His people to salvation. "For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen." (Rom 11:36). Now that is all encompassing. Everything is answerable to God's decree. Or rather all things find their explanation in God's purposes, which are decreed by Him in eternity.

In **Ephesians 1:11** we read of the realization of all of God's intentions for history to come to pass without fail. "In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will..." Here we see the purpose of God as unchangeable. He is always successful. God works all things according to the counsel of His will, and there the counsel of His will is the same as God's decree.

We could go back to **Genesis 50:20**. Do you recall Joseph's words to his brothers as they were concerned about Joseph's possible retaliation for having sold him into slavery into Egypt? Joseph said to his brothers: "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive." Joseph recognized God's decree, even God's purpose in using the evil intentions and designs and actions of men to accomplish His purposes in history.

Back in Isaiah's prophecy we read of God's decree or God's counsel to send an evil king upon His people to accomplish His purposes in judgment.

Isaiah 10:5f. "Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger And the staff in whose hand is My indignation. ⁶I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of My wrath I will give him charge, to seize the spoil, to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets."

John 19:11. "Jesus answered, 'You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.'" Here the Lord Jesus declared that it was in the decree of God that Pilate had authority over Him at that time in order to accomplish God's purposes.

We read in **Acts 2:23** the apostle Peter's explanation of what had happened at the crucifixion. "Him, being delivered *by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God*, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death..." Here the "determined purpose and foreknowledge of God" is the same as the decree of God or the counsel of God, as stated in other places of Scripture..

Peter made the same assertion in his prayer to God as recorded later in **Acts 4:27**. "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel,

were gathered together ²⁸to do *whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.*” Now when did God purpose this? When did God determine beforehand that this would be done? Even from eternity. This speaks of God’s decree; it speaks of God’s counsel.

Numbers 23:19. “God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”

This speaks of God’s immutable counsel.

Ephesians 1:3-5. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, ⁵having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, *according to the good pleasure of His will.*”

Here the “good pleasure of His will” speaks of God’s decree.

And so, all things that take place in the world are due to God’s eternal decrees. And yet, we must understand that in all things that take place, *God cannot be charged with doing evil*, although He has decreed that all evil take place in history. The statement of Peter in Acts 2:22ff speaks of the wicked actions of men, but that God has nevertheless decreed would take place.

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-- ²³this Jesus, *delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.*” (Acts 2:2f)

The paragraph we read from the Confession declared that God was free of culpability for the evil that men commit even though He decreed that they would commit them.

“God hath decreed in Himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; *yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein*; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature....⁵”

This is a very important matter to understand. Someone recently accused me falsely of teaching that God is *directly* responsible for all things that take place, and this person thought that to mean even the evil that happens in the world. But this is not true, nor have I ever taught that that was so. Although God has decreed all that takes place, the evil that occurs is fallen man’s responsibility, not God’s. Man rules, but God overrules.

Now when we consider all of the words that we have mentioned respecting these matters, here is a summary of their definitions:

- (1) God’s sovereignty: His full control over all that He has created.
- (2) God’s decree: His ordering of all events that transpire in history.
- (3) God’s foreknowledge: In eternity God knowing and loving His elect in Christ.
- (4) God’s election: In eternity God choosing His people whom He has determined to save from their sins.
- (5) God’s predestination: God’s decree that His elect would be conformed to His Son.

Now let us return to our text, Romans 8:29, which reads, “For those whom He foreknew He also predestined *to be conformed to the image of His Son...*” Paul identified the destiny that God had determined to bring His people. God decreed before creation that the ones He had chosen would become conformed to Jesus Christ. Let us consider what this means and some of the implications for us.

⁵ Article 3, paragraph 1, 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith.

First, let us consider the word “conformed.” The question that may be asked is this: “When does this conformity to Jesus Christ take place?” Is it speaking of something that will only occur at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ at the resurrection? Or is our conformity to Jesus Christ a process that is taking place even now, during this life? I believe it is best to see this work of God conforming us to the image of Christ as beginning to take place when we were converted and this process continues throughout our life as God sanctifies us by His Word through the power of the Holy Spirit. This process continues but will not be fully known until the day of the resurrection.

Second, we read that God has predestined His people to be conformed *to the image of His Son*. This is a full statement that warrants further treatment than what time we have remaining today. But the meaning of this statement must be understood in the purpose of God suggested throughout all of Scripture that *God had originally created every human being in His image*. We read in Genesis 1:26f:

²⁶Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” ²⁷So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

What does this mean? It involves a number of matters, but at the heart of it is the idea that God made us His image to reflect His glory through our ruling over His creation on His behalf.

God set man in the world as the sign of his own sovereign authority, in order that man should uphold and enforce His--God’s--claims as Lord. Earthly monarchs too have the habit of setting up images of themselves in their kingdom as signs of their sovereign authority--it was in that sense that Israel thought of man as the representative of God.⁶

But of course the entrance of sin dethroned man from this lofty position and rendered him unable to fulfill his role as the image of God. After the fall men and women continued to be the image of God, but that image that manifest is marred terribly. They do not reflect the true nature of God nor do they manifest the rightful stewardship of God’s world on behalf of their creator. But God sent His Son,

whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; ³ who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they (Heb 1:2ff)

And so, even though we do not see mankind living according to the original purpose for what God had created him, ruling over the world, we do see Jesus enthroned and ruling. This is the teaching of Hebrews 2:5ff.

⁵For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. ⁶But one testified in a certain place, saying:

“What is man that You are mindful of him,
Or the son of man that You take care of him?
⁷You have made him a little lower than the angels;
You have crowned him with glory and honor,
And set him over the works of Your hands.
⁸You have put all things in subjection under his feet.”

For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing *that is* not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. ⁹But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. ¹⁰For it

⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1957), p. 146f.

was fitting for Him, for whom *are* all things and by whom *are* all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (Heb. 2:5-10)

We addressed this passage and this matter in early April⁷, when we were considering Romans 8:16-17 which read:

¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order *that we may also be glorified with him*. (Rom. 8:16f)

Paul is stating the same reality here in Romans 8:29. When he declared, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son...” What He was stating was that God had predestined His people to finally realize through their conformity to Jesus Christ the original design and intention that God had for the human race, that we might be His image bearers, ruling over all the works of His hands on His behalf.⁸ This will be fully and finally realized when Christ returns and we are raised from the dead and our conformity to the likeness of our Savior will be realized.

What then, may we summarize and conclude from all that we have considered today? *First, we affirm the biblical teaching of God’s sovereign plan and control over His creation*: “God hath decreed in Himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass.”

And so, who is in control of this world? What of your life? Are you in control or is God? That the Bible teaches the sovereignty of God over all things is abundantly clear. God “*works all things after the counsel of His own will*” (Eph. 1:11). God is in control. All things that have and will occur in history, from the smallest detail to the greatest of events, were decreed of God before creation. **Charles Spurgeon**, the great 19th century London pastor, once said it something like this,

I believe that the wing of an aphid unsettling the dust on the leaf of a rose was as much ordained by the eternal counsel of God as the marching of great armies to vanquish the nations.

Now that was his way of describing from the least detail to the greatest event, a sovereign God has decreed everything.

Here are more of his words on this matter as **Charles Spurgeon** had sought to encourage Christians:

This thought of the directness of the Divine operations must be carried into Providence. [Now let me interrupt here. Providence is the manifestation or the unfolding of God’s decrees. God is working in history to bring about His purposes.] It will greatly comfort you if you can see God’s hand in your losses and crosses. Surely you will not murmur against the direct agency of your God! This will put an extraordinary sweetness into daily mercies, and make the comforts of life more comfortable still, because they are from a Father’s hand. If your table is scantily furnished it shall suffice for your contented heart when you know that your Father spread it for you in wisdom and love. This shall bless your bread and your water! This shall make the bare walls of an ill-furnished room as resplendent as a palace, and turn a hard bed into a couch of down.

My Father does it all. We see His smile of love even when others see nothing but the black hand of Death smiting our best beloved. We see a Father’s hand when the pestilence lays our cattle dead upon the plain. We see God at work in mercy when we ourselves are stretched upon the bed of languishing. It is ever our Father’s act and deed! Do not let us get beyond this—but rather let us enlarge our view of this Truth of God and remember that this is true of the little as well as of the great. Let the lines of a true poet strike you—“If pestilence stalks through the land, you say the Lord has done it—has He not done it when an aphid creeps upon the rosebud? If an avalanche tumbles from its Alp, you tremble at the will of Providence—is not that will as

⁷ See sermon #FBC704, given on Lord’s Day, April 7, 2013.

⁸ For those with ears to hear, what might be explored in this matter is our participation in the promise of God of our share in the reign of the enthroned Lord Jesus as the Davidic Son of God in his human nature.

much concerned when the sere leaves fall from the poplar?” Let your hearts sing of everything—Jehovah-Shammah—the Lord is there.⁹

And we say, “Amen” to Spurgeon’s words of comfort to the Christian.

Second, we affirm the fact that God determined all things “freely.” And that adverb is an important word—“freely.” As our confession rightly states, “God hath decreed in Himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, *freely* and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass.” This means that God was under no obligation to anything or anyone to ordain what He ordained. God is absolutely free. He only is in “need”, if we want to call it that, to be consistent with His own nature. He cannot be in need to something outside of himself. That would make him subject to something else. And God is infinite and perfect. No, the only limitation is that which He self-imposes; He cannot deny Himself.

Thirdly, the statement declares the biblical teaching that **God’s decree does not change**: “God hath decreed in Himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and *unchangeably*, all things, whatsoever comes to pass.” There is no “Plan B” in God’s dealings. It is not as though God tries one thing hoping to succeed, but then fails, and so He goes at it in a second effort in a different manner, to accomplish what had failed to take place earlier. We could cite **Hebrews 6:17**, with regard to His unchangeable counsel, His unchangeable decree. The word used is “immutable”, in other words, immutable. :

“Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise **the immutability of His counsel**, [that is, the unchangeableness of His decree] confirmed it by an oath,¹⁸ that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.”

You see God had first given to Abraham a *promise*. And then years later He confirmed this promise with an *oath*. And so by these two unchangeable things, it is impossible for God to lie, we, who have fled to Christ for salvation, may have strong comfort, strong assurance, strong consolation.

Fourthly, the Scriptures state that God is not the author of sin nor has any cooperation with men in their sin, although He has decreed all things, even the evil that people do. Again the confession reads,

God hath decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; **yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein**... (Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, Art. 3, par. 1)

Now admittedly, this is a great mystery to us. How can God decree all things that have happened in history so that nothing occurs but that which He has decreed from eternity, and yet He is not therefore responsible for the horrendous evil that evil men perpetrate on others in the world? How can this be? But this is the clear and united testimony of God’s Word. And so, God is not the author of sin nor does He have any fellowship with sin or sinners; nevertheless, He has decreed even what they do.

Fifthly, the decree of God, or His eternal counsel in which He ordained all things to occur in history, nevertheless does not violate the free decisions of sinful men. Again, this is a mystery, but it is biblical truth. Now one might try and make this charge, “If God had decreed all that comes to pass in history, why then should I even put forth any effort? After all, what purpose does my will have, if God has decreed all things for God has decreed all things and they will come to pass whether I work or not.”

Well the old Puritan writer from the 17th century, **Thomas Watson** wrote these words:

The decree of God does not affect my endeavor; for he that decreed my salvation decreed it in the use of means, and if I neglect the means I reprobate myself. No man argues thus: God has decreed how long I shall live, therefore I will not use means to preserve my life, I will not eat and drink. God has decreed the time of my life

⁹ Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 12, sermon 668.

in the use of means, so God has decreed my salvation in the use of the Word and of prayer. As a man who refuses food murders himself, so he that refuses to work out his salvation destroys himself. The vessels of mercy are said to be prepared unto glory (Rom. 9: 23). How are they prepared but by being sanctified? and that cannot be but in the use of means; therefore let not God's decree take thee off from holy endeavors. It is a good saying of Dr Preston, 'Hast thou a heart to pray to God? It is a sign no decree of wrath has passed against thee.'

Now this understanding of God's decree or counsel that we have been asserting is true to classic **Reformed** understanding of the Scriptures. What do we mean by Reformed? Well, some call it Calvinism, but we regard it as biblical teaching. **Charles Spurgeon** was an outspoken Calvinist, or again, what we prefer to call "Reformed." He said this:

"The old truth that Calvin preached, that Augustine preached, that Paul preached, is the truth that I must preach to-day, or else be false to my conscience and my God. I cannot shape the truth; I know of no such thing as paring off the rough edges of a doctrine. John Knox's gospel is my gospel. That which thundered through Scotland must thunder through England again." — C. H. Spurgeon

Spurgeon was very bold in the proclamation of the sovereignty of God and His dealings with people in the world. And we will do less. Because this is the clear teaching of the Scriptures. If you want comfort, then look to a sovereign God.

On the other hand, if you are outside of Christ, you aren't going to find any comfort here, other than the promise that God will forgive you if you come to Christ in repentance and faith. In fact if you are outside of Christ now, you have no basis of hope, for God is against you. This sovereign God, this powerful God that we have been talking about, is against you. In fact the Scriptures declare that you are without God and without hope in this fallen world. But the great hope lies in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I would urge you, encourage you, to turn from sin and embrace the Lord Jesus Christ as your only hope of salvation from God's wrath upon your sin. And thankfully God receives the greatest of sinners because Jesus Christ is the greatest of Saviors to great Sinners. Come to Him in faith. And if we can help you to do so, you contact us. We would be happy to serve you in this way. Until next time may our God greatly bless you.

Now, Arminians, that is, those who deny that God has decreed all things that take place in history, do rob God of the glory that is His by arguing that God merely **knew ahead of time** what would occur in history, because He is omniscient, God knows all things. We certainly would affirm that God knows all things. But it strips God of His glory and the truth of His person and work to say that God **only** knew and did not **plan** and thereafter **execute**, bring to pass all that He willed from eternity. The Scriptures will simply not allow for such an explanation of the nature and works of God.

Psalms 33:11. "The counsel of the LORD standeth forever, the thoughts of His heart to all generations."

Isaiah 14:24. "The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand."

That is not speaking of God's knowledge, but of God's intention and purpose to bring to pass what He has planned. God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given *us* everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work. (2 Thess. 2:16f)

INTRODUCTION
To Arthur Pink's
The Sovereignty of God

Who is regulating affairs on this earth today-God, or the Devil? That God reigns supreme in Heaven is generally conceded; that He does so over this world, is almost universally denied-if not directly, then indirectly. More and more are men in their philosophizing and theorizing relegating God to the background. Take the material realm. Not only is it denied that God *created* everything by personal and direct action, but few believe that He has any immediate concern in *regulating* the works of His own hands. Everything is supposed to be ordered according to the (impersonal and abstract) "laws of Nature." Thus is the Creator banished from His own creation. Therefore we need not be surprised that men, in their degrading conceptions, exclude Him from the realm of human affairs. Throughout Christendom, with an almost negligible exception, the theory is held that man is "a free agent," and therefore, lord of his fortunes and the determiner of his destiny. That Satan is to be blamed for much of the evil which is in the world is freely affirmed by those who, though having so much to say about "the responsibility of man," often *deny* their *own* responsibility, by attributing to the Devil what, in fact, proceeds from their *own* evil hearts (Mark 7:21-23).

But who *is* regulating affairs on this earth today-God, or the Devil? Attempt to take a serious and comprehensive view of the world. What a scene of confusion and chaos confronts us on every side! Sin is rampant; lawlessness abounds; evil men and seducers *are* waxing "worse and worse" (2 Tim. 3:13). Today, everything appears to be *out of joint*. Thrones are creaking and tottering, ancient dynasties are being overturned, democracies are revolting, civilization is a demonstrated failure; half of Christendom was but recently locked-together in a death grapple; and now that the titanic conflict is over, instead of the world having been made "safe for democracy," we have discovered that democracy is very *unsafe* for the world. Unrest, discontent, and lawlessness are rife everywhere, and none can say how soon another great war will be set in motion. Statesmen are perplexed and staggered. Men's hearts are "failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth" (Luke 21:26). Do *these* things look as though *God* had full control?

But let us confine our attention to the religious realm. After nineteen centuries of Gospel preaching, Christ is still "despised and rejected of men." Worse still, *He* (the Christ of Scripture) is proclaimed and magnified by very few. In the majority of modern pulpits He is dishonored and disowned. Despite frantic efforts to attract the crowds, the majority of the churches are being emptied rather than filled. And what of the great masses of non-church goers? In the light of Scripture we are compelled to believe that the "many" are on the Broad Road that leadeth to destruction, and that only "few" are on the Narrow Way that leadeth unto life. Many are declaring that Christianity is a failure, and despair is settling on many faces. Not a few of the Lord's own people are bewildered, and their faith is being severely tried. *And what of God?* Does He see and hear? Is He impotent or indifferent? A number of those who are regarded as leaders of Christian-thought told us that God could not help the coming of the late awful War, and that He was *unable* to bring about its termination. It was said, and said openly, that conditions were *beyond* God's control. Do these things look as though *God* were ruling the world?

Who is regulating affairs on this earth today-God, or the Devil? What impression is made upon the minds of those men of the world who, occasionally, attend a Gospel service? What are the conceptions formed by those who hear even those preachers who are counted as "orthodox?" Is it not that a *disappointed* God is the One whom Christians believe in? From what is heard from the average evangelist today, is not any serious hearer *obliged* to conclude that he professes to represent a God who is filled with benevolent intentions, yet unable to carry them out; that He is earnestly desirous of blessing men, but that they will not let Him? Then, *must* not the average hearer draw the inference that the Devil has gained the upper hand, and that God is to be pitied rather than blamed?

But does not everything seem to show that the Devil *has* far more to do with the affairs of earth than God has? Ah, it all depends upon whether we are walking by faith, or walking by sight. Are your thoughts, my reader, concerning this world and God's relation to it, based upon what you *see*? Face this question seriously and honestly. And if you are a Christian you will, most probably, have cause to bow your head with shame and sorrow, and to acknowledge that it *is* so. Alas, in reality, we walk very little "by faith." But what does "walking by faith" signify? It means that our thoughts are formed, our actions regulated, our lives molded by the Holy Scriptures, for, "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing *by the Word of God*" (Rom. 10:17). It is from the Word of Truth, and that alone, that we can learn what is *God's* relation to this world.

Who is regulating affairs on this earth today-God or the Devil? *What saith the Scriptures?* Ere we consider the direct reply to this query, let it be said that the Scriptures *predicted* just what we now see and hear. The prophecy of Jude is in course of fulfillment. It would lead us too far astray from our present inquiry to fully amplify this assertion, but what we have particularly in mind is a sentence in verse 8- "Likewise also these filthy dreamers defile the flesh, *despise dominion and speak evil of dignities.*" Yes, they "speak evil" of the Supreme Dignity, the "Only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords." Ours is peculiarly an age of irreverence, and as the consequence, the spirit of lawlessness, which brooks no restraint and which is desirous of casting off everything which interferes with the free course of self-will, is rapidly engulfing the earth like some giant tidal wave. The members of the rising generation are the most flagrant offenders, and in the decay and disappearing of

parental authority we have the certain precursor of the abolition of civic authority. Therefore, in view of the growing disrespect for human law and the refusal to “render honor to whom honor is due,” we need not be surprised that the recognition of the majesty, the authority, the Sovereignty of the Almighty law-giver should recede more and more into the background, and the masses have less and less patience with those who insist upon them. And conditions will not improve; instead, the more sure Word of Prophecy makes known to us that they will grow worse and worse. Nor do we expect to be able to stem the tide-it has already risen much too high for that. All we can now hope to do is warn our fellow-saints against the spirit of the age, and thus seek to counteract its baneful influence upon them.

Who is regulating affairs on this earth today-God, or the Devil? What saith the Scriptures? If we believe their plain and positive declarations, no room is left for uncertainty. They affirm, again and again, that God is on the throne of the universe; that the scepter is in His hands; that He is directing *all things* “after the counsel of His own will.” They affirm, not only that God created all things, but also that God is ruling and reigning over all the works of His hands. They affirm that God is the “Almighty,” that His will is irreversible, that He is absolute Sovereign in every realm of all His vast dominions. And surely it *must* be so. Only two alternatives are possible: God must either rule, or be ruled; sway, or be swayed; accomplish His own will, or be thwarted by His creatures. Accepting the fact that He is the “Most High,” the only Potentate and King of kings, vested with perfect wisdom and illimitable power, and the conclusion is irresistible that He must be God in fact as well as in name.

It is in view of what we have briefly referred to above that we say, Present-day conditions call loudly for a new examination and new presentation of God's omnipotency, God's sufficiency, God's Sovereignty. From every pulpit in the land it needs to be thundered forth that God still lives, that God still observes, that God still reigns. Faith is now in the crucible, it is being tested by fire, and there is no fixed and sufficient resting-place for the heart and mind but in *the Throne of God*. What is needed now, as never before, is a full, positive, constructive setting forth of the Godhood of God. Drastic diseases call for drastic remedies. People are weary of platitudes and mere generalizations-the call is for something definite and specific. Soothing-syrup may serve for peevish children, but an iron tonic is better suited for adults, and we know of nothing which is more calculated to infuse spiritual vigor into our frames than a scriptural apprehension of the full character of God. It is written, “The people that do *know their God* shall be strong and do exploits” (Dan. 11:32).

Without a doubt a world-crisis is at hand, and everywhere men are alarmed. But God is not! *He* is never taken by surprise. It is no unexpected emergency which now confronts Him, for He is the One who “worketh all things after the counsel of His own will” (Eph. 1:11). Hence, though the world is panic-stricken, the word to the believer is, “Fear not!” “All things” are subject to His immediate control: “all things” are moving in accord with His eternal purpose, and therefore “all things” are “working together *for good* to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.” It must be so, for “of Him, and through Him, and to Him are *all things*” (Rom. 11:36). Yet how little is this realized today even by the people of God! Many suppose that He is little more than a far-distant Spectator, taking no immediate hand in the affairs of earth. It is true that man is endowed with power, but God is all-powerful. It is true that, speaking generally, the material world is regulated by law, but behind that law is the law-Giver and law-Administrator. Man is but the creature. God is the Creator, and endless ages before man first saw the light “the mighty God” (Isa. 9:6) existed, and ere the world was founded, made His plans; and being infinite in power and man only finite, His purpose and plan cannot be withstood or thwarted by the creatures of His own hands.

We readily acknowledge that life is a profound problem, and that we are surrounded by mystery on every side; but we are not like the beasts of the field-ignorant of their origin, and unconscious of what is before them. No: “We *have* also a more sure Word of Prophecy,” of which it is said ye do well that ye “take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19). And it is to this Word of Prophecy we indeed do well to “take heed,” to that Word which had not its origin in the mind of man but in the Mind of God, for, “the prophecy came not at any time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake moved by the Holy Spirit.” We say again, it is to *this “Word”* we do well to take heed. As we turn to this Word and are instructed there, we discover a fundamental principle which must be applied to every problem: Instead of beginning with man and his world and working back to God, we must begin with God and work down to man-“In the beginning *God!*” Apply this principle to the present situation. Begin with the world as it is today and try and work back to God, and everything will seem to show that God has no connection with the world at all. But begin with God and work down to the world, and light, much light, is cast on the problem. Because God is *holy* His anger burns against sin; because God is *righteous* His judgments fall upon those who rebel against Him; because God is *faithful* the solemn threatenings of His Word are fulfilled; because God is *omnipotent* none can successfully resist Him, still less overthrow His counsel; and because God is *omniscient* no problem can master Him and no difficulty baffle His wisdom. It is just because God is who He is and what He is that we are now beholding on earth what we do-the beginning of His outpoured judgments: in view of His inflexible justice and immaculate holiness we could not expect anything other than what is now spread before our eyes.

But let it be said very emphatically that the heart can only rest upon and *enjoy* the blessed truth of the absolute Sovereignty of God as *faith is in exercise*. Faith is ever occupied with *God*. That is the character of it; that is what differentiates it from intellectual theology. Faith *endures* “as seeing Him who is invisible” (Heb. 11:27): endures the disappointments, the hardships, and the heartaches of life by recognizing that *all* comes from the hand of Him who is too wise to err and too loving to be unkind. But so long as we are occupied with any other object than God Himself there will be neither

rest for the heart nor peace for the mind. But when we receive all that enters our lives as from *His* hand, then, no matter what may be our circumstances or surroundings-whether in a hovel, a prison-dungeon, or a martyr's stake-we shall be enabled to say, "The lines are fallen unto me in *pleasant* places" (Psa. 16:6). But *that* is the language of *faith*, not of sight or of sense.

But if instead of bowing to the testimony of Holy Writ, if instead of walking by faith, we follow the evidence of our eyes, and *reason* therefrom, we shall fall into a quagmire of virtual atheism. Or, if we are regulated by the opinions and views of others, peace will be at an end. Granted that there *is* much in this world of sin and suffering which appalls and saddens us; granted that there is much in the providential dealings of God which startle and stagger us; that is no reason why we should unite with the unbelieving worldling who says, "If I were God, I would not allow this or tolerate that," etc. Better far, in the presence of bewildering mystery, to say with one of old, "I was dumb, I opened not my mouth: because Thou didst it" (Psa. 39:9). Scripture tells us that God's judgments *are* "unsearchable," and His ways "past finding out" (Rom. 11:33). It must be so if faith is to be tested, confidence in His wisdom and righteousness strengthened, and submission to His holy will fostered.

Here is the fundamental difference between the man of faith and the man of unbelief. The unbeliever is "of the world," judges everything by worldly standards, views life from the standpoint of time and sense, and weighs everything in the balances of his own carnal making. But the man of faith *brings in God*, looks at everything from *His* standpoint, estimates values by spiritual standards, and views life in the light of eternity. Doing this, he receives whatever comes as from the hand of God. Doing this, his heart is calm in the midst of the storm. Doing this, he "rejoices in hope of the glory of God."

In these opening paragraphs we have indicated the lines of thought followed out in this book. Our first postulate is, that because God *is God* He does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases; that His great concern is the accomplishment of His own pleasure and the promotion of His own glory; that He is the Supreme Being, and therefore Sovereign of the universe. Starting with this postulate we have contemplated the *exercise* of God's Sovereignty, first in Creation, second in Governmental Administration over the works of His hands, third in the Salvation of His own elect, fourth in the Reprobation of the wicked, and fifth in Operation upon and within men. Next we have viewed the Sovereignty of God as it relates to the human Will in particular and human Responsibility in general, and have sought to show what is the only becoming attitude for the creature to take in view of the majesty of the Creator. A separate chapter has been set apart for a consideration of some of the difficulties which are involved, and to answering the questions which are likely to be raised in the minds of our readers; while one chapter has been devoted to a more careful yet brief examination of God's Sovereignty in relation to prayer. Finally, we have sought to show that the Sovereignty of God is a truth revealed to us in Scripture for the comfort of our hearts, the strengthening of our souls, and the blessing of our lives. A due apprehension of God's Sovereignty promotes the spirit of worship, provides an incentive to practical godliness, and inspires zeal in service. It is deeply humbling to the human heart, but in proportion to the degree that it brings man into the dust before his Maker, to that extent is God glorified.

We are well aware that what we have written is in open opposition to much of the teaching that is current both in religious literature and in the representative pulpits of the land. We freely grant that the postulate of God's Sovereignty with all its corollaries is at direct variance with the opinions and thoughts of the natural man, but the truth *is*, we are quite *unable* to think upon these matters: we are *incompetent* for forming a proper estimate of God's character and ways, and it is because of this that God has given us a revelation of *His* mind, and in that revelation He plainly declares, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8, 9). In view of this Scripture, it is only to be expected that much of the contents of the Bible *conflicts* with the sentiments of the carnal mind, which is *enmity* against God. Our appeal then is not to the popular beliefs of the day, nor to the creeds of the churches, but to the Law and Testimony of Jehovah. All that we ask for is an impartial and attentive examination of what we have written, and that made prayerfully in the light of the Lamp of Truth. May the reader heed the Divine admonition to "prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21).