

CHAPTER 7

GOD'S DECREES AND PROVIDENCE

God's decrees include his determination of all his actions, and thereby all the events that occur. It includes his decree to create, and then to govern all that happens in his creation. The last chapter dealt with creation; this one will deal with his continuing government of creation—his providence. The quality of God especially relating to his decrees and providence is his sovereignty, based on his attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, wisdom, and goodness.

Confessional statements

The ancient creeds emphasized God as the Creator more than his sovereign government over creation. Later creeds, especially in the Reformed tradition, emphasized the Scriptural doctrine of God's eternal decree.

WCF 3: "1. God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

"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."

WLC 12: "What are the decrees of God? A. God's decrees are the wise, free, and holy acts of the counsel of his will, whereby, from all eternity, he hath, for his own glory, unchageably foreordained whatsoever comes to pass in time, especially concerning angels and men."

WSC 7, "What are the decrees of God? A. The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass."

[The Standards at this point go on to deal with the special application of this doctrine to the destiny of angels and humans. That subject will be covered especially in another course.]

The Westminster standards also deal with the doctrine of providence in particular.

WCF 5: “1. God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible fore-knowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

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

“3. God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them [miracles], at his pleasure.”

[The Confession goes on to relate the providence of God to the existence and actions of sin in his creatures. While he ordains all things, including sin, he does not approve of sin, nor tempt to sin.]

WLC 18, “What are God’s works of providence? A. God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving, and governing all his creatures, ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory.” (WSC 11 is very similar)

[For a modern discussion of the sovereignty of God from a critical perspective, see *Theology Today* 53:1 (Apr. 1996); the whole issue is devoted to this subject.]

General Scriptural statements

The Scriptures assert that God has determined all things and controls all things that occur

Job 23:13 [words of Job], “But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases.”

Ps 33:11, “But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.”

Ps 103:19, “The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.”

Note. The kingdom of God’s sovereignty, as in this passage, is to be distinguished from the mediatorial or messianic kingdom, which is promised to the Messiah as a result of his fulfillment of the terms of the covenant of redemption. Most “kingdom” passages in the Bible are speaking of that messianic kingdom; those passages which speak of the general kingdom of God’s sovereignty can be determined by the context.

Ps 135:6, “The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.” [examples follow from both nature and human history]

Isa 28:29, “All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.”

Acts 15:17b-18, “. . . says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages”

Rom 8:28, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Rom 11:36, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.”

Eph 1:11, “. . . according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will”

Realms of God’s sovereignty

Not only is God sovereign in general, but he is sovereign in all the various areas of existence in particular. Many passages teach this about the various areas:

Sovereign over nature

Gen 6-9 [the Noachic flood and all its accompanying events]

Exod 7-11 [the plagues on Egypt]

Josh 10:11-14 [sun stands still; large hailstones]

2 Kgs 20:10-11 [sun’s shadow goes back]

Job 36:22 – 37:21 [Elihu speaking; the entire passage shows God’s control over the various activities of nature, especially the weather]

Job 38-41 [God speaking; control over all nature and its creatures; note Job’s conclusion in 42:2]

Ps 104:10-30 [God’s creation and control of the weather, the plants, the animals, and the physical activity of man]

Ps 135:5-7, “I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods. The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths. He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.”

Ps 147:8-9, “He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow in the hills. He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call.”

Ps 147:15-18 [control of the weather]

Jonah [cf. God’s sovereign control over the wind (1:4), the great fish (1:17; 2:10), the plant (4:6), the worm (4:7), and the scorching wind (4:8)]

Cf. Gospel accounts of Jesus’ power over weather, the sea, and the fish

Rev 6-19 [the great plagues on the earth and its inhabitants in the last days]

Sovereign over trivial events, or so-called chance events

1 Kgs 22:23, 34, “The Lord has decreed disaster for you [Ahab]. . . . But someone drew his bow at random and hit the king of Israel between the sections of his armor.”

Prov 16:33, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”

Matt 10:29, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.”

[Cf. R. C. Sproul, *Not a Chance* (1999; rev. 2014)]

Sovereign over circumstances and affairs of individuals and of nations

1 Sam 2:6-8 [Hannah’s prayer], “The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor.”

Job 12:23-24 [words of Job], “He makes nations great, and destroys them; he enlarges nations, and disperses them. He deprives the leaders of the earth of their reason.”

Prov 16:9, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.”

Isa 10:5-19 [God’s using Assyria to judge Israel, and then his destroying Assyria for their pride and idolatry]

Lam 2:17 [speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians], “The Lord has done what he planned; he has fulfilled his word, which he decreed long ago.”

Dan 2:21, “He sets up kings and deposes them.”

Dan 4:34-35 [declaration of Nebuchadnezzar], “His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’”

Amos 3:6, “When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?”

John 19:11 [Jesus to Pontius Pilate], “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”

Acts 17:24, 26, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth. . . . From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.” (purpose – v. 27)

Jas 4:13-15 [recognition that God controls all aspects of our lives; thus we do not presume on the future]

Sovereign over free actions of people

Exod 12:36, “The Lord had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians.”

2 Sam 17:14, “Absalom and all the men of Israel said, ‘The advice of Hushai the Arkite is better than that of Ahithophel.’ For the Lord had determined to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom.”

Psa 33:15, “[the Lord]—who forms the hearts of all”

Prov 19:21, “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”

Prov 21:1, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.”

Rom 9:17-18 [quoting Exod 9:16], “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: ‘I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name

might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.”

Sovereign over moral actions of his creatures

Sinful actions

Gen 45:5-8, “And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. . . . But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.” (cf. Ps 105:17)

Gen 50:20, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

Exod 9:16 [“hardening” Pharaoh’s heart, to show his glory over Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt; same expression used frequently in the Exodus narrative; cf. Rom 9:17-18]

Deut 2:30, “But Sihon king of Heshbon refused to let us pass through. For the LORD your God had made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate in order to give him into your hands, as he has now done.”

2 Sam 16:10, (concerning Shimei’s cursing David) “But the king [David] said, ‘What do you and I have in common, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the Lord said to him, “Curse David,” who can ask, “Why do you do this?”’”

2 Sam 24:1, “Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, ‘Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.’” Cf. 1 Chr 21:1, “Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.”

Note that 1 Chronicles states that Satan tempted David to this sin, while 2 Samuel says that God led David to do it, as a judgment against Israel. We conclude, therefore, that God is sovereign over even the sinful activities of Satan. God did not tempt David to sin, but he controlled Satan’s sinful intention to tempt David so that David sinned in a particular way, which God had determined.

Acts 2:23, “This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.”

Acts 3:17-18, “Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer.”

Acts 4:27-28, “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”

It is important to realize that while God is sovereign over all events, even sinful events, the actual sin arises in the heart of the free moral creature. God cannot sin, nor can he tempt his creatures to sin (Jas 1:13-15). Theologians distinguish two wills in God: his decretive will, by which he has foreordained whatever comes to pass, and his preceptive will, in which he states the laws he commands us to keep. These sometimes are called God’s “revealed will” vs. his “secret will.”

See the excellent article by John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God?” ch. 5 of *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge and Grace* (Baker Books, 2000), ed. by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware. Also very good is the classic work by Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Topic 3, Question 15: “May the will be properly distinguished into the will of decree and of precept, good purpose (*eudokias*) and good pleasure (*euarestias*), signified, secret and revealed? We affirm.” (1:220-225)

Some assert that God is “responsible” for evil events, either moral or natural, since he ordains all these events. This is inaccurate, since responsibility entails accountability to a superior. God has no superior, hence he is accountable to no one. It is imprecise to say that God is responsible for anything, as though there were a higher moral standard to which he must conform (or as though he must conform to our own sense of morality). God is good, and he defines that goodness by his own nature and will. This point is forcefully made by Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason and Revelation* (1961), ch. 5, “God and Evil” (republished separately in 1996 by the Trinity Foundation under the title “*God and Evil: The Problem Solved*”).

Good actions

Ps 119:35-37, “Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.”

2 Cor 12:7-10 [God gave Paul a thorn in the flesh in order to further his sanctification]

Gal 5:22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Eph 2:10, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Phil 1:6, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Phil 2:13, “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

Means of God’s providence

God is absolute in his sovereignty. He does not depend on any actions of his creatures in order to determine what he will do. His will is not conditional.

On the other hand, God does act through means. The Confession speaks of “the liberty or contingency of second causes” (3:1), and that his decrees can “fall out” from second causes “either necessarily, freely, or contingently” (5:2). That is to say, events he has determined may be brought about by what we would call “ordinary means” (1:7). There are various levels of these means:

Necessarily—the event follows as a matter of necessary consequence or law. A rock falls because of gravity. Jonah’s vine dies because the worm attacked it. Rains fall because of the ongoing water cycle.

Freely—the event follows as a matter of free choice under a given set of circumstances. Paul’s thorn in the flesh results in his being humble before God and fellow Christians (a less spiritual person might react to the same circumstance in a totally different way). Pharaoh decides to break his word to Moses (an honest pharaoh would have kept his promise; remember that even though God hardened his heart, Pharaoh acted freely). During the same evangelistic meeting some are converted and others are not; different children from the same family often make opposite moral choices.

Contingently—the event depends upon another event before it can occur. Paul’s travel plans depend on the absence of certain obstacles (e.g., Jews plotting to kill him, prevention by the Holy Spirit, stormy season at sea). All “if . . . then” statements in the Bible (including covenant formulations) point to the results as being contingent events, depending upon the actions of second causes.

Miracles and extraordinary providence

Most events are governed by “ordinary providence,” that is, what we call the normal course of events. All these events, while seeming to be ordinary, still are completely under God’s control and work out to accomplish his purpose.

Occasionally God in his providence does something dramatic or amazing; it seems almost miraculous. This may be a “miracle of timing,” where ordinary events occur in a way to produce an unlikely or timely or even predicted effect. These events, while technically not miraculous, are classed as “extraordinary providence.”

In spite of the normal use of means in God's providence, he often uses direct action of his will to carry out his purpose; the Bible records most of these events. This is the case with creation itself, and with miracles, normally defined as direct actions of God in the external universe. Christian theism (unlike deism) maintains that God does intervene in his created order to perform miracles, acts which contradict the ordinary physical laws or processes he has put in place. These miracles are evidences of his existence and attributes. There are numerous great miracles in the OT, used to bring his people into existence, preserve them, and teach them of the Lord. The "signs" in John's gospel reveal Jesus' character and mission. The "signs of the apostles" were given to confirm their authority and teaching. In the spiritual realm, the workings of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification are not technically "miracles," but are "supernatural works of God."

For a classic discussion and analysis of supposed post-apostolic miracles, see B. B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (1918; more recently published under the title *Miracles Yesterday and Today, True and False*), which demonstrates the cessation of the miracles and the poor historical support for miracles in the patristic, medieval, and modern periods. Regarding the modern Charismatic teaching about miraculous spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues, see John A. Battle, "Speaking in Tongues in the New Testament," *WRS Journal* 14:2 (Aug 2007).