
Mission 119 Ministries

**DECONSTRUCTING CALVINISM
EPISODE 11: THE ETERNAL DECREES
OF GOD**

Hutson Smelley

www.sermonaudio.com/forestbranch

SERIES GOALS

- **Short, focused lessons**
 - **Explain Calvinism**
 - **Address claims of Calvinism**
 - **Exegetically**
 - **Historical**
 - **Philosophically**
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EPIISODE GOAL

- Explain what the doctrine of the eternal decrees is**
 - Support in scripture and philosophy?**
 - History of the doctrine**
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DECREEES IN THE BIBLE

- **In the KJV, there are 57 occurrences of the word “decree” in 55 verses.**
 - **Of these 57 occurrences, 47 of them refer to the decrees of men. Of the remaining 10 occurrences, we read that God decreed the rain in creation (Job 28:26), the boundaries of the seas (Job 38:10; Jeremiah 5:22), the position of the stars (Psalm 148:6; Proverbs 8:29), the destruction of Israel (Isaiah 10:22; Zephaniah 2:2), to punish Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:17, 24), and in reference to the city boundaries being extended (Micah 7:11).**
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DECREES OF GOD

The decree of God is His eternal plan or purpose, in which He has foreordained all things that come to pass. (Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, p. 84)

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. (R.L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology*, 211)

DECREES OF GOD

By the decrees of God we mean that eternal plan by which God has rendered certain all the events of the universe, past, present, and future. (Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology*, p. 123)

The decrees of God are the eternal plans of God whereby, before the creation of the world, he determined to bring about everything that happens. (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 332)

DECREES OF GOD

**Spencer likewise makes clear that God's decrees go to everything without exception: "...whatever comes to pass in the history of mankind does so by virtue of the fact that it suited the eternal plan or purpose of God... Therefore, whatever comes to pass in any part of creation, at any time in history, does so because the omniscient God knew it as a possibility, willed it as a reality by His omnipotence, and established it in His divine plan or purpose."
(Duane Edward Spencer, *TULIP*, 22)**

PROOF TEXTS

➤ **Pillar proof text: Acts 17:26**

- **“And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitations.”**

➤ **General proof texts: Job 23:13-14; Psalm 115:3; Psalm 135:6; Proverbs 16:33; Isaiah 14:26-27; Isaiah 46:10-11; Daniel 4:35; Daniel 11:36; Matthew 10:29-30; Ephesians 1:11.**

➤ **Although we should expect such a profound truth claim as the Calvinist’s decrees of God to have a single explicit proof text—somewhere in the Bible that God says he decreed everything before creation—it does not.**

ARGUMENT FROM PROPHECY

God has in the Scriptures foretold the certain occurrence of many events, including the free actions of men, which have afterwards surely come to pass. Now the ground of prophecy is foreknowledge, and the foundation of the foreknowledge of an event as certainly future, is God's decree that made it future. The eternal immutability of the decree is the only foundation of the infallibility either of the foreknowledge or of the prophecy. But if God has decreed certain future events, he must also have included in that decree all of their causes, conditions, coordinates, and consequences. No event is isolated; to make one certainly future implies the determination of the whole concatenation of causes and effects which constitute the universe. (A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 206)

PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENT

(1) God has foreknowledge and created the material universe, (2) therefore, every event in the creation is certain to occur in accordance with God's foreknowledge of the event before creation, (3) therefore, every event that comes to pass is fixed, (4) therefore, a causative agent fixed every event without exception, (5) that causative agent could only be God, and (6) therefore, God decreed (fixed) everything before creation.

PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENT

- **Is it possible God decreed everything? Is it necessary that God decreed everything?**
 - **Thinking of the universe God created as a box, if everything in the box is predetermined so are God's actions in the box.**
 - **Is it possible that God has free will within the bounds of His character?**
 - **What does free will mean?**
 - **What does free will not mean?**
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PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENT

- **Option 1: God decreed for the box not only all the ends but everything in the middle including His interventions in the box so that He can do no more and no less than what He decreed to do in the box**
 - **God foreknows because of the script**
 - **God is bound by the script**
 - **Possibility 2: God foreknows all possible timelines, with and without all possible interventions in the box, and reserves the right to intervene as and when He chooses subject only to the restrictions that He intervenes consistent with His character and ensures certain outcomes**
 - **God foreknows because He is omniscient, no script**
 - **God retains His own freedom**
 - **God protects human free will but works in and through our choices intervening as and when He chooses to ensure certain outcomes**
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THE BIBLICAL DATA

- **Which of Options 1 and 2 better fits the Biblical data**
 - **First, no verse expressly teaches the eternal decrees; that doctrine is based on a chain of inferences**
 - **Second, the Bible repeatedly shows God intervening as and when He chooses to change outcomes with no indication that His hands are tied**
 - **Third, while we see God intervening there is no clear example of his intervening to do “mind control” (no Jedi Knight)**
 - **Fourth, the Bible repeatedly gives of commands that require us to act, choose, refrain, seek, etc.**
 - **Fifth, in a scripted universe can we love like Jesus loved? Can we glorify God? (e.g., 1 John 3:7: ...let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous.)**
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ARGUMENT FROM HISTORY

The first deterministic influence on Augustine was Stoicism, which taught every miniscule event in the universe was controlled by fate. The Stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger stated it succinctly, "The fates lead the willing and drag the unwilling."... The Stoics' conclusion? Assent (agreement/choices) itself was fated. Like some modern philosophers and theologians, Stoics side-stepped the incompatibility of determinism and free choice by redefining terms and inventing clever nuances. Despite their nuances, Stoics believed every event in the universe was pre-determined and fated by the gods.... (Ken Wilson, *The Foundation of Augustinian-Calvinism* (p. 6-8))

ARGUMENT FROM HISTORY

Augustine's first work, *On Providence (De ordine, 386 CE)* teaches this Stoic philosophy when asserting that the falling of a leaf to an exact location is predetermined by a meticulous micromanaging God and the precise neck muscle actions of two roosters fighting are predetermined by God. Augustine himself singled out (Stoic) Providence as the one belief he never doubted throughout his diverse philosophical-religious journeys. (Ken Wilson, *The Foundation of Augustinian-Calvinism* (p. 6-8))

ARGUMENT FROM HISTORY

In contrast to Stoicism's causal nexus, Neoplatonism's One, and Manichaeism's god, the God of Christianity did not decree everything—despite being sovereign. The first early Christian theologian, Irenaeus (ca.185), argued that the Christian God was superior in power to the Gnostic god since he allowed free human choices and could still accomplish his plans (without Stoic divine micromanaging manipulation). (Ken Wilson, *The Foundation of Augustinian-Calvinism* (p. 86-87))

ARGUMENT FROM HISTORY

- **Does the fact that we see nothing of the complete determinism in Christian writing *UNTIL* Augustine, a lifelong stoic, introduced it mean that it is unbiblical?**
 - **No. Perhaps at the end of the day the Biblical view is the same as stoicism and a number of other pagan philosophies.**
 - **BUT the history of Christianity has exhibited a number of times when non-Christian influences came into the church and then people argued the non-Christian ideas were in the Bible.**
 - **It raises a big red flag that we don't see this hard determinism before Augustine and for the most part do not see it again until the Reformation.**
 - **When combined with the undeniable fact that **NOT ONE VERSE** in the Bible says God decreed or foreordained everything, the Augustinian view becomes particularly suspect.**
 - **And then Christians should also recognize that the very holiness of God and His word compels an expectation that in general it will be different from, not in agreement with man-made philosophies.**
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FINAL REMARKS

- **The better view is to accept God's foreknowledge of His creation (the box) because that flows from omniscience and the Bible teaches this doctrine, but we don't need to add to it. We should be content to say, without taking it a step further and insisting on a decree nowhere found in Scripture, that God created with foreknowledge and intervenes in His creation as He pleases and, therefore, everything that comes to pass was either caused or permitted by God. This maintains God's sovereignty and human free will.**
 - **The practical implication of refuting the Reformed doctrine of the decrees of God is that our lives are not scripted for us.**
 - **Our thoughts, words and actions matter a great deal and God is just to hold us responsible for our actions (rather than being the cause of our sins) because we were created with genuine volition.**
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