

Systematic Theology: The Divine Decrees

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Well, if you've been with us, you know that for the past few months we have been continuing our series on the Psalms and last week we finished Psalm 60, I believe, and now we're going to take a break from the Psalms to return to our study of systematic theology. We're going to kind of have two parallel tracks going alongside each other for the next probably couple of years, actually, as we do Psalms and we will do some of those and then we will do systematic theology and kind of pick things up, variety being, of course, the spice of life and our means of keeping from things getting too tedious, maybe even, if we vary things.

Now, in our study of systematic theology, I'm extraordinarily excited about what I have to say tonight even if my tone of voice does not betray that just yet. In the study that we've done so far in systematic theology going back a few months at the end of last year, we studied the doctrine of revelation. We looked at what that which we base our faith on, the revelation of God found in Scripture, the Scripture is authoritative and that we are to bring our minds into submission to it. Then we examined the attributes of God after that. We considered God in his essence, his mind, meaning his omniscience; we considered his power; his moral character; and we looked at God as the Triune God, as the Trinity. In other words, we saw God, we studied God for who he is within himself, who he is by nature and what he is like.

Well, as we go forward over the next few weeks, we are now going to study him for what he has done and what it is that he does and that brings us from looking from inside God at himself, you might say, now we look at the way that he has operated, how he has manifested himself and things of that nature, and tonight what we're going to study is a very profound topic that is not often taught on, frankly. I know that I have not taught on it before this evening, but we are going to consider what is called the divine decree, in the singular, or more theologians perhaps call it the divine decrees, plural, and basically what we want to think about it is like this. Let me start with an illustration. Well, let me back up. When we say the divine decree or the divine decrees tonight, we are talking about the same thing. I'll explain the distinction between the singular and the plural in just a moment. It's all a matter of perspective, not saying anything distinctive by the different numbers. But think about it this way, think about a construction project, the construction of a modern office building. Contractors work according to previously prepared architectural plans. Somebody in their mind conceived what that building was going to

look like before the first shovel full of dirt was turned over, and once the dirt was begun, then everything goes according to that blueprint. The blueprints guide the work, generally speaking. I realize there are change orders but you get the basic point that I'm making.

Let's think about it from that perspective as we consider the very opening book and the very opening verse of the Bible. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And the simple question is this: did God have a plan in place for what would happen next? Did God have something that he was intending to do when he created the heavens and the earth? Before he ever spoke the first thing into existence, did he have in mind what was going to take place after that? And the biblical answer to that question is: yes, he did. And the theological name for the plan that God had in mind is called the divine decree. The divine decree is the plan of God and if we can start with a definition this evening, going off of the book that we are using by Louis Berkhof just as kind of a starting point for us in general and in tonight's material, Louis Berkhof defines the decree of God like this: the decree of God is his eternal plan or purpose in which he has foreordained all things that come to pass. I'll say that again: the decree of God is his eternal plan or purpose in which he has foreordained all things that come to pass. What does that mean? Well, we could look at it this way. Let's assume that as I stand here looking forward at you and chronologically I'm looking into the future. If I turn my back to you and look behind me, I'm looking into the past. As I look back into the past, I see exactly what God had decreed from the moment of creation up until this point. The outworking of history is the unfolding of the decree of God because he has decreed all things that would come to pass and when something comes to pass, we realize that God determined that that would happen before he created the universe.

It's a very profound subject. And let me just say this, a couple of things by way of encouragement. First of all, it is quite possible that some of us will leave tonight with a headache because this strains the mind. No doubt about it. We should expect that, right? When we study the plan and the purposes of God, shouldn't we find things, shouldn't we expect to find things that are difficult to understand when we as a sinful finite creature peer into the mind of a holy, infinite, eternal God? Shouldn't we expect to find things that go beyond our understanding? Of course we should. That's the nature of things. It's humbling by definition and so if this stretches us a bit, that's okay. Let me encourage you with this. Tonight, trying to cover all of this in 55 minutes is insanity but that's what I'm going to try to do this evening. Let me encourage you to just try to get the sweep of what we're saying here this evening and then go back and listen to it again. I have the advantage of having prepared this over time. You're hearing it for the first time and trying to get a drink out of a fire hydrant. I understand that and so, you know, let's be patient with ourselves as we come to this and let this kind of sink in like a steady rain sinking into dry ground so that it could find its mark and have its fullest effect on us. This is unbelievably important. Everything flows from this.

Now, with that said, let me say one other thing and tie it to a doctrine that we have often taught in the past and that we refer to often in the life of Truth Community, so much so that it becomes a regular part of conversation in our lives, in our fellowship, and I praise God for that, I thank God for that. We have often taught and we will teach again in a few

weeks on the doctrine of divine providence, and in the doctrine of divine providence we have said that God is at work in absolutely everything that happens in the universe. He sustains and upholds his universe and he directs all things to accomplish his purpose so that everything that happens is under the providential guiding hand of God. Now, providence relates to the divine decree in this way: Providence is God working out his divine decree. The divine decree, in the divine decree, God determined in his mind in a single eternal act, not in successive stages, but he determined everything that would happen going forward. Providence as it unfolds in time, providence is the outworking of that in time under the hand of God so that providence corresponds in symmetrical perfection to the divine decree. That's all. Providence has a purpose behind it and that purpose is the decree of God.

Now, so we say that God determined beforehand everything that would happen in the universe. It's a comprehensive unlimited statement that we're making here tonight. Now, the question is: does Scripture teach such a complete sovereignty and foreordination of God? And the answer to that question is: yes, it does. Turn to the book of Isaiah 46, for example. This is just an introductory text and then we will unfold this with seven points that follow in rapid succession. One of the things about teaching on the divine decree is that I can stand up here and know that God decreed that I would teach on this topic before the beginning of time. That's one of the outworkings and applications of this. That doesn't guarantee the inerrancy of everything that I say but God appointed me to teach this tonight here in Cincinnati, Ohio, and he appointed your presence here tonight before the beginning of time to hear it at precisely this time in your life. All of a sudden all of life comes a pretty remarkable and holy exercise when we realize that we are living under a divine plan that is working itself out to perfection.

In Isaiah 46:8, God says this in verse 8, he says,

8 Remember this, and be assured; Recall it to mind, you transgressors. 9
Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no
other; I am God, and there is no one like Me,

And look at what he says there in verse 10,

10 Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things
which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I
will accomplish all My good pleasure';

From the beginning, God declared what would happen and he knew that it would happen because he was in perfect sovereign control of it all, and his purpose will be established. Think about it from this perspective, beloved: one of the things that causes us to respect and revere the Scripture is the whole dynamic of fulfilled prophecy, that God centuries before events took place in the course of time, declared exactly what would happen. Think about the many prophecies of Christ that were fulfilled even though they were made centuries beforehand. How is God able to do that? It's not simply because he knew but he determined that it would happen and he saw the end from the beginning as creation

was spoken into existence. So it was a certainty that Judas would betray Christ for 30 pieces of silver. It was a certainty that Christ would be crucified. It was a certainty that he would be born in Bethlehem to a virgin. And because it was certain, that's how the prophets were able to speak about it centuries in advance as they spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

So let's just unpack this really quickly with seven different aspects of the divine decree. I have relied in large part on the work of S. Lewis Johnson and Charles Hodge in what I have to say. I have kind of rephrased their points. S. Lewis Johnson followed Charles Hodge extremely closely when you compare the two, but that's neither here nor there. There are other sources that I looked at but these were especially influential in the way that I presented it here this evening to you.

First of all, what can we say about the divine decrees? I'm going to use the plural even though we should think about it as a single decree because God did it all in one great comprehensive act of his eternal mind. First of all, we say it this way, the first point is that the decrees are diverse and yet they are one. The decrees are diverse and yet they are one. And what we mean by that is simply this: there is a unity and a diversity to the decrees of God. There is a diversity in this sense, think about it this way: there are countless, over the course of time since the beginning of creation, there have been countless events, billions upon billions of people that have lived and died and are living now, there is a diversity to that and there is a complete diversity to those countless people and events. It's like there is an infinite jigsaw puzzle is being put together over the course of time. So it is extremely diverse and yet it is one puzzle, so to speak. It's not a puzzle in the sense that God has to figure anything out. I'm just using an illustration that everything is interlocked in it, there is a unity to the divine decree, and yet it is comprehensive of everything that happens and you see this in a crucial passage from the Apostle Paul.

Look over at Ephesians 1:9. It says, as you're turning there,

9 [God] made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him 10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.

A comprehensive statement about what Paul has in mind. All things in Christ, things in the heaven and things on the earth. And he goes on to say,

In Him 11 also we have obtained an inheritance [watch this], having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

All things. Plural. All things in heaven and on earth. All things, it says. God is working those out according to the counsel, singular, of his will, singular. God has a singular will that comprehensively embraces everything in heaven and on earth and he is working all

of that out according to his divine knowledge. That is a statement and an expression of the divine decree.

So you can speak of one decree, remember our point here that we are discussing right now is the decrees are diverse and yet they are one, you can speak of one decree because it emphasizes the unified plan of God and that he did this all in an instant, so to speak. God did not work this out progressively in his mind over time, it was an instantaneous mental deliverance of the plan. Or you can speak about it as the divine decrees to show that all things are covered by it. I'm using the term "decrees" in deference to the greater and more established theologians who use the plural when they talk about this. The decrees are diverse and yet they are one.

Now, secondly, the decrees are eternal. The decrees are eternal and as we dive deeper into these things, it's like we're diving off a Mexican cliff deep into the waters below and we're diving deep into waters that cannot be fully exhausted. We're going into the very mind and plan of God as we say these things. The decrees are eternal. What we mean by that is this: is that God planned the course of the universe before time began. When Scripture records Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," you can think about it this way, before Genesis 1:1, God had determined what was going to happen and then when he created things, the plan was already in place. The outcome was already determined for everything that would ever occur.

So you can see indications of this in a few New Testament passages. You're in Ephesians 1, that's a good place to be. Look at Ephesians 1:3 where Paul, praising God which is always the appropriate response to his self revelation and self-disclosure, Paul says,

3 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, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.

Before the foundation of the world, God chose us in Christ. God determined who the saved would be before time began. He had that plan in place and we will talk about this more a few weeks down the line when we talk about the doctrines of election and the difficult doctrine of reprobation as we realize that God determined the eternal destinies of everyone who would ever live before time began. We are on holy ground. We should take our shoes off in response, so to speak.

Now, in 2 Timothy 1, you can turn there. All that we are looking at right now is the fact that God's plan is rooted in eternity before time began; he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. And if you think about it, beloved, I mean, these things work out in time. These things work out in time and there is this unfolding of the plan, we'll talk about this, God uses means in order to bring us to Christ. It means that everyone that was involved in leading you to Christ, those who taught the Gospel to you, perhaps a godly parent, perhaps a friend who handed you a tract, all of that was determined before time

began, that precisely those people would be used by God in order to lead you to faith in Christ in time. This goes everywhere. It is absolutely comprehensive.

And in 2 Timothy 1:9, Paul says that God,

9 has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity,

According to his purpose, according to his grace, granted to us in Christ, when? From all eternity. The decree was eternal. It was established before creation. And as you read in Scripture, these things are so assumed they are just embedded in narratives, even. God's eternal decree, his plan for the ages, included the cross of Christ at the hands of godless men.

Look at Acts 2. Again, we are just talking about the fact that the decrees are eternal right now. Acts 2, we'll start at verse 22,

22 Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know-- 23 this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

Christ was crucified according to a predetermined plan that God had established before the beginning of time. The whole nature of the atonement, the whole nature of substitution, the whole nature of the Incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Christ was determined to happen before time began.

So when we realize that the decrees are eternal, when we realize the biblical teaching on providence which we have looked at so many times in the past, you can make this very simple statement: God by his great power and wisdom is moving all things wisely forward according to his purpose, and that has a very significant implication for us to understand. This changes, what I'm about to say changes everything. This is not a cosmic game of chess where God moves one piece and waits to see how you respond or how Satan responds and then he'll determine his next move, and so he moves forward a little bit and then Satan, and then he's moving forward determining his reactions based on what happens in time. No. God planned it all in advance. God determined all the moves instantly in eternity past and now in time we simply watch it unfold and participate as we live our lives. The decrees are eternal. They are rooted in things before time. Open theism is a rank heresy. The idea that God is learning things as he goes along and God is responding to things like we are in our own lives, that's absolutely false. That is a total denial of the character of God. That has nothing to do with Christianity no matter what seminary the men who propagate it teach at.

Now, thirdly, we could say that the decrees are immutable, by which we mean the decrees are unchanging. God's plan does not change based on the unfolding events of time or history or upon the whims of man.

Look over at Psalm 33. We're just kind of surveying different Scriptures here this evening to get ideas on the table, to get biblical principles on the table. Psalm 33, beginning in verse 10. Actually, let's go back to verse 8, and keep going back to verse 6 because it all fits here. And watch how it starts in creation and works its way back into the decree of God. Psalm 33:6,

6 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, And by the breath of His mouth all their host. 7 He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap; He lays up the deeps in storehouses.

What should the response of you and I and all men everywhere be? Verse 8,

8 Let all the earth fear the LORD; Let all the inhabitants of the world [look at the comprehensive nature of that] Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. 9 For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast. 10 The LORD nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. 11 The counsel of the LORD stands forever, The plans of His heart from generation to generation.

God had plans in his mind when he created the heavens and the earth by the word of his mouth, and it moves forward and it stands unchanged as generation comes and generation goes; as one generation wave falls upon the beach and withdraws, another generation comes, the purpose of God stands immutable, unchanging, moving forward with an absolute certainty that is guaranteed by the providential sovereign hand of God, never to be contradicted, never to be changed, never to be diminished.

In James 1, you don't have to turn there just for the sake of time. In James 1:17 the writer of Scripture says that, "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth." In eternity past, God determined everything that would happen and because he is an unchanging immutable God, there would be no change in the outworking of his plan. It doesn't matter if nations rise up against him. It doesn't matter if the whole world apostatizes and turns against Christ. God's plan will move forward unchanged.

Now, let's just think a little bit theologically about why this must be the case. Let's root this in things that we have already considered about the nature and the attributes of God. Think about it with me, beloved. When God created the heavens and the earth he had a plan in place, just as much as a contractor has blueprints in place when he turns the first shovel full of dirt. He knows where this is going. Well, if earthly contractors can do that, if car manufacturers can take a lump of steel and turn out a vehicle through their

manufacturing process having accounted for all of the different things that a car needs to take place, if man can do that in a relatively complex fashion on an individual basis, well, then God can do it infinitely with his infinite wisdom. Now, think with me. We're talking about why the plan is immutable and unchanging. God is infinitely wise, right? God is omniscient. Because he is infinitely wise, that means something about his eternal plan. It could never change because he could never come up with a better plan than what he has already done. To change it would be to change it from something lesser to something better and there is no reason for that because he had already developed his plan, so to speak, with infinite wisdom. It could never be improved upon.

God is also omnipotent. He is all-powerful. And beloved, this is so great to say: God is not going to change anything because somehow something wasn't working out correctly. There is never any need for that. He had developed a perfectly wise plan so there is no need to change it from that direction, and there could be nothing that would happen in the course of time at the hands of man, at the hands of creation, at the hands of hostile forces. Because God is all-powerful, nothing could force him to change the plan to go to a Plan B. There is no Plan B. There is Plan A determined by an all-wise God and everything works according to that. Sometimes you'll hear even good Bible teachers talk about God going to a Plan B but that is not a good theological way to talk. God's plan is unchanging because he is unchanging and therefore as he works it out in his perfect power, there is never any need to change.

Now, fourthly. We have said that the decrees are diverse and yet they are one; the decrees are eternal, determined before time began; the decrees are immutable, meaning they are unchanging. Fourthly, we can say this: that the decrees are free. They are free. By that I don't mean that no one has to pay for them. They are not free in that sense. That's not how we're using the term. What we mean by this point, the decrees are free, is this: God established his decrees free from any outside influence. God didn't have to take counsel with anyone outside of the Godhead in order to determine what to do. He's not like a United States President who consults with his cabinet from time to time and says, "These are the issues in our country. What should we do about them? What should we do within your realm of responsibility?" And have a give and take. There was nothing like that.

Look over at Isaiah 40. And beloved, as you turn there, there is just this cumulative impact. It's like a great snowball rolling down a great mountain downhill that just gains size and momentum as it goes. As we look at these things together, there is just this growing cumulative impact of the greatness of God in the establishment of creation. The decrees are free.

Isaiah 40:13 says,

13 Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, Or as His counselor has informed Him?

The implied answer is no one.

14 With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge And informed Him of the way of understanding? 15 Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust.

Who instructed God before time began? Who influenced his decision? There was no one there to do it. God being omniscient, eternally knowing all things, had no need to draw upon outside counsel as he established his divine decree. And in a statement that, again, goes everywhere, beloved, in a statement that makes us draw back and bend our knee and bow low before this great and sovereign God, we say this: when God established the divine decrees, he decided what would happen solely based on what he thought was wise and would please him. There was nothing else to contribute to the decision. He had no obligation to man. He was under no obligation to a higher authority, no higher standard of righteousness. Man cannot hinder his purpose and man is not a partner at the table with the decrees of God. This was God's prerogative alone. He existed from all of eternity in the divine perfections of who he is, and he determined in his mind, "This is what will happen comprehensively throughout the course of my creation. Thus it shall be." And our response is simply to draw back from the holy fire of such great majesty and, "Yes, Lord, amen!" is how we respond to that, to realize God was under no obligation to you or to me or to anyone else, to no higher standard. God was completely free to do what he wanted to do and when he decided what would happen in the course of all time, it was wise. When he decided what would happen, it was good because it pleased him. And as those who are creatures, as those who are sinful creatures, no less, fallen in Adam from the greatness of the position that God established man with, for us, we have no right, we have no prerogative, we have no business in any way second-guessing or casting aspersions on the justice of God in light of what he has determined to be wise and good because his decrees are free. They belong to him alone. Creation is his. All wisdom is his. The power is his. It all belongs to him and so if he's the owner, by what right would we begin to criticize or question what he has determined to be good.

Can you imagine just on an earthly scale, suppose that you had gone out and you had purchased your dream home and with your resources and everything gathered together, you purchased your dream home and you set about making it out and decorating it the way that you wanted it to be. Owning that home, you're the owner, you've got the title to it, it's a labor of your hands, bingo. Can you imagine someone that you don't even know coming in and telling you what kind of appliances you should put in the kitchen and what color you should paint the bedrooms and what kind of windows you should put in and the type of molding you should have on the ceiling? You would look at them like they were insane. "What kind of nut are you? This is my house! Who are you? I don't even know you. On what basis are you critiquing the way that I decorate my home?" Well, in a far greater way, man is in an even lesser position than the stranger that comes to your house. We don't come to God and say, "You should have done it differently." We bow low before him recognizing his free, majestic sovereignty in determining what would happen. We will work out some implications and some applications at the end of our time together if I get going here.

Point 5: the decrees are certain. The decrees are certain. Theologians will use the term "efficacious" to describe this aspect of the decrees. All that means is that God's decrees are certain to come to pass. It is guaranteed to happen. And you could think about, for example, Romans 8:28, again, seeing the comprehensive nature of things.

28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. 29 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;

God knew beforehand. God predestined this result. God determined that this would happen and therefore he takes all things and works them together in a way that is the fulfillment of the outworking of his eternal purpose. It is certain to happen.

Now, listen: we rightly love Romans 8:28 because of the spiritual comfort that it brings us in our trials. Maybe we've viewed this a bit from blinders on and just say, "God is going to work out what's happening in my life for good," and that's a proper application of it all. But beloved, what I want you to see tonight is a greater perspective on that. The comfort of Romans 8:28 is premised on a far greater reality that God has planned what happens and all events are linked together in his single decree of what he wanted to happen in the universe. So a good and loving and wise God decreed what would happen, set it into motion, carries it out and sustains and directs it by his comprehensive providence and you and I dwell in the midst of that great biblical reality. God's providence is the guarantee that his decrees will be fulfilled.

Now, think about it. You say, "Well, couldn't God take his eye off of things for 15 minutes? Do we have to be so absolute in our statements about this?" Well, would you take your eye off of the road in a busy heavily traveled interstate with shifting traffic going on about? Would you take your eye off the road for 15 minutes? You wouldn't do that. You realize that attention to detail is the guarantee for your safe arrival. Well, God, operating on a far greater level of complexity than we could ever begin to comprehend, takes his eye off of no detail because every detail has a purpose in the fulfillment of his decree and the outworking of his purpose.

Now, let me pause for a brief possible objection here. Look, there are all kinds of objections that could be raised up to these things and I'm not going to address them all this evening, but let me just tell you something for certain: whenever you start to teach clearly on the sovereignty of God, there will be objections to it. Why? Because the pride of man is threatened by it. The desire of man to be the master of his own fate, the controller of his own destiny, the pride and the independence and the sinfulness of man rises up in objection to these things. Well, not so for us, beloved. Not so for us who believe the Bible and submit to the God of the Bible. No, we gladly check our pride at the door as we enter into these things. We recognize that we are living as the privileged

recipients of divine blessing in the theater of God's operation. We are a guest, as it were, in his world.

So we do not buck against this even if those others do, but the question could be asked and might be in your mind, "Well, what about the responsibility of man in these things, then? If all things are certain to occur, then why do we even bother to try? Why do we even pay attention to what we're doing?" Well, beloved, in brief: yes, God has appointed what will occur and so great and majestic is his decree that he has also appointed the means by which things will occur. God has appointed that there would be a people who would believe in Jesus Christ. Romans 10 says that doesn't happen in a vacuum, that men believe in Christ as people are preaching the Gospel to them. So the end that God appoints that men would believe in Christ, is fulfilled by a means that God has appointed through the preaching and proclamation of the Gospel. That's only one illustration of it. Our efforts are part of the divine decree.

And listen, two things that I would say about this. You can say this, "How then do I live? How am I supposed to live in response to teaching like this?" To which I say wouldn't it be wonderful if God had given us a perfectly sufficient book to show us exactly what we should do in response to his divine decree? Oh, wait, I've got it in my hands. I've got a Bible in which God has revealed not only the reality of his decree but how men should live in response to it, how men should contemplate themselves. And beloved, far from making us careless and indifferent and robbing us of motivation as we live as we contemplate the divine decrees, understand this: God will judge us not according to his decree but by our response to his revealed will. God has made his will known for your life in his word and how you respond to that will be the basis upon which he judges you.

So the reality of the divine decree does not take away incentive for life and incentive for intelligent thought, it provides the basis for those things to happen. I want to tell you, you think about these things rightly, when you think about these things rightly, do you know what happens? All of a sudden you realize that every detail of your life is vested with eternal significance because it is rooted in the divine decree. There is nothing that is mundane. There is nothing that is irrelevant. There is nothing that is too small to be noticed. I mean, if Christ said that he would reward his disciples for a cup of cold water given to another disciple, if he will go to that level in the reward, then if he'll go, if he says, "Whatever you do whether you eat or drink, whatever you do, do all to the glory of God," you see all of a sudden that the truth of the divine decree vests all of life with meaning because it's all connected to the purposes of God to which we gladly devote ourselves and give glory to his name.

Now, sixthly: we say that the decrees are comprehensive. We don't need to spend much time here because I've been saying this all along. The decrees are comprehensive, by which we mean everything is included in the divine decree. Everything is included. God rules over nations. The greatest motions of world history are under his hand, and at the same time, Scripture tells us that a sparrow does not fall to the ground apart from him.

In Acts 4:27 and 28, Peter is preaching to Jews after the resurrection and he says,

27 For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, [and as he prays to God, he says] whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel [the world leaders, the people groups of the time, and what were they there for], 28 to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.

"The nations and these leaders were gathered together simply to do what you had determined beforehand would be accomplished, O God." Now, those men who crucified Christ acted wickedly according to their own desires. Beloved, God appointed those actions without compelling them to do the evil, without forcing them to do it. Joseph said to his brothers, "You meant evil against me but God meant it for good."

Now, a really hard question. I told you we were going to have a headache before we were done. I'm almost done here. You can reach for your ibuprofen in a moment. If we believe that God predetermined all things to happen, then how do we account for the fall of man? How do we account for sin and evil in the world? Did God appoint that to happen as well? And the answer is: yes. He did. He appointed it. He planned it without forcing men to do evil because God tempts no one to evil. Their evil, beloved, was a means to a greater end. There is a greater end than simply preventing sin from happening. Beloved, the presence of evil in the world allows for – watch this – a greater revelation of the character of God. If there was no sin in the world, we would know nothing about God's justice and his judgment on wicked men. If there was no sin in the world, we would know nothing about God's ability to take what men meant for evil, as Joseph's brothers did in his lifetime, we would know nothing about God's ability to take what they meant for evil and turn it out to good for his people. We would know nothing about that if we just lived in a perfect sinless environment. Beloved, we would know nothing about the grace of God if sin had not come into the world. You would know nothing about the gracious loving nature of your heavenly Father, that he forgives sin willingly and gladly through faith in Christ, you would know nothing about that if sin had not been in the world. We wouldn't know anything about the full glories of Christ if not for him being on the cross and a sin-bearing Savior voluntarily laying down his innocent righteous blood for sinners like you and me. We would know nothing about that. Sin, then, becomes like the black velvet cloth laid out upon which diamonds are displayed and provides a background for a display of things of greater value. All of those good results would not have happened in a sinless world.

Now, let me come back to where I started here as our time is about up. Do you know what? These things are hard to understand. This taxes our mental abilities, it certainly taxes mine. We should expect that as we contemplate the infinite mind of a holy God. In fact, if you remember, we can identify with what Peter said in his own epistle. Remember what Peter said about the writings of the Apostle Paul? Peter, an apostle writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit says, "You know, when I look at the writings of Paul, there are some things that are hard to understand." He says, "It's hard for me to understand." Well, if that's true of an apostle, how much more so for us? Yes, there are things that are hard to understand, there are things that are hard for us to reconcile within our minds

about these things, but that doesn't deny the truth of them. That's not an argument against the truth of them at all. If God is great and unsearchably great in his wisdom, if that language of Scripture means anything, that God is unsearchably great, then it means that when we start to explore his greatness, that we're going to quickly find there are things that are unsearchable beyond our understanding, to which we, again, we step back in humility and we bow low in worship rather than letting that become an argument against the truth of what Scripture says.

So what's the point of all of this? What's the point of the divine decrees? What's the overarching purpose of the decree of God? That brings us to our seventh and final point: the decrees are for the glory of God. The decrees are for the glory of God. God's decree was the way that pleased him to display his glory throughout eternity future. By doing things in exactly this way, the outcome will produce a recognition of the glory of God of which he is preeminently worthy.

Go to the end of Romans 11. I have just a couple of passages to close with here. Romans 11, beginning in verse 33. We read it reverently. We bow before his word as we see what the inspired writer of Scripture says. "Oh, oh,

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!

Quoting from the passage we read earlier in Isaiah 40,

34 For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?
35 Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again?
36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

And in Revelation 4:11 it says,

11 Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.

Two things to say, beloved, as we close, just by way of the simplest of application. What can we draw from this in the way that we frame our worldview and the way that we think about life, the way that we think about ourselves in the presence of God? Well, this promotes humility. God is great and we are small in light of the recognition of his divine decree.

Another thing that this should do in your heart, beloved, is produce a sense of confidence and trust. When the trials of life are raging the most and you are disoriented by the smoke and the fumes of everything that is happening around you and you can't find your next step forward, you can always find room to breathe simply by saying, "Not only is God sovereign in this, but there is a purpose in this. There is a purpose in my trials. I don't see

it, but this is something that God has appointed for me. It is part of an outworking of a greater purpose and therefore I can rest in that. I can rest in the reality that a wise God has appointed even this for me in my life at this time and I can trust in the outworking of that." All of a sudden you have a reference point that gives you perspective. All of a sudden you have a firm stone to stand upon in the midst of the shifting sand. There is a purpose at work even though you don't understand it. Everything Scripture teaches us, everything works according to the wise plan of your heavenly Father.

Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, truly we would join with the writer of Scripture and magnify the depth of your wisdom and the unsearchable greatness of your ways. We have hustled through this material, Father. We have gone through it so quickly that it's hard to get our minds around it. Sink it deep into our soul and to recognize that even as we believe in a divine providence that superintends all that happens, to connect that with what we've seen here tonight, that all that happens is working according to a predetermined plan of a wise and holy God ultimately designed to promote your glory and even our good as a secondary means in the end. We are grateful, Father. We bow low and we worship you and we pray that you would bless us as we go forward, Father, on this night which you have appointed for us to be together, in this place, at this time, at this point in history. What a magnificent thought, O God. We ascribe all the glory to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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