

TEACHING THROUGH THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Chapter 3: Of God's Eternal Decree

LESSON 005

TEACHER NOTES

REVIEW FROM PREVIOUS LESSON

God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. Moreover, there is one God and there are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. Much of this is beyond our ability to understand, but has, none the less, been made clear in the scriptures.

God's Sovereign Decree

TEACHING NOTE

God is absolutely sovereign over all things. The confession does not present a universe with cold, mechanical rules, but a deeply personal, logical, and good plan ordained by a loving Father. It is a delicate and mysterious balance: God ordains all things, yet humans are not robots. God is in control and yet God has left our wills free. This should give us incredible comfort.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will...
Ephesians 1:11

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 3.1-2

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.

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God is God: It is a necessary part of the character of God that He controls all things. If He didn't, He wouldn't be God. So we affirm that God has commanded and ordained all things, not just salvation but every hair on your head and every movement of every atom. He made this plan completely freely, without any outside influence or necessity. When we think of choices we always think of them from a human perspective where even our most free choices are constrained by our circumstances: to choose between chocolate and vanilla ice cream requires being in a place where someone has made chocolate and vanilla ice cream available for us. God is constrained by nothing and has determined from before time or creation to save some. (Isaiah 46:9-10, Matthew 10:29-30, Romans 9:15-18)

He Has Left Us Free: We are not robots, or cogs in a big machine, mechanically doing the things that we were designed to do and nothing else. God has left us free. It is a truth beyond our comprehension that even though God is sovereignly in control of absolutely everything, He is able to create a world where people are none the less free to choose. Which means that man, not God, is the author of sin, for it is our first father Adam who rebelled against God's stated will. (Genesis 3:6, Ecclesiastes 7:29, James 1:13–14, Acts 2:23)

God's Unconditional Decree: We have to keep something in balance here. Man is free to choose, but God is still sovereign and so God's decrees are not based on man's choices. All of our choices are free and yet dependent on our circumstances and limitations. God has no limitations and no circumstances in the way that we would understand them. He stands above and before creation, having complete freedom from it and complete authority over it. God doesn't look into the future to see who will choose Him, and then decree their salvation based on that foresight. Rather, the future exists exactly because God has decreed it. (Romans 9:11–13, 2 Timothy 1:9, Ephesians 1:4–5)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Many people try to protect human free will by saying, "God just looked into the future, saw what we would choose, and then decreed it based on our choices." Why does the Confession so strongly reject this idea?**

It rejects this because it makes God dependent on the actions of His creatures, which would mean God is not God. Only God's freedom is absolutely, so His choices must be fully and totally free. Indeed, by definition nothing is certain UNLESS God decrees it, it is He who makes the future the future.

2. **A common objection to God's absolute sovereignty is that it makes humans into mere "robots." But the Confession makes clear that "violence is not offered to the will of the creatures," how would you explain this to someone?**

God does not force us to act against our will; rather, we voluntarily choose to do exactly what we most desire in that moment. Our choices are genuine and have real consequences, even while they perfectly fulfill God's overarching plan. This is both clear to those the Spirit has revealed it to, and a tremendous mystery. We can understand intuitively how this works, but it is beyond our intellect to grasp.

3. **The Confession teaches that our genuine choices are not taken away. How does this encourage us to still make wise choices, share the gospel, and pray, rather than just being passive?**

God ordains the final outcome, and the *means* to achieve that outcome. So for example, if He chooses to save someone He also ordains that specific people at specific times should pray for that person, invite them to church, pastors should preach the gospel to them. God uses means to achieve His ends and we are commanded to obey within that framework.

4. **Why is it so crucial for our faith and our view of God's character to maintain that while God ordains everything, He is absolutely *not* the author of sin?**

If God were the author of sin, He could not be a perfectly holy and just judge. This again is a great mystery to us that God ordains all things and yet the responsibility for the existence of sin truly doesn't lay at God's feet but at our feet. God left man free and we freely chose sin. If it were any other way then God would not be good and God would not be sovereign.

5. If God has ordained whatsoever comes to pass, why are we still held morally responsible for our sins?

We are held responsible because we sin by choice, acting according to our own corrupted desires without being externally coerced by God. This includes the true freedom of Adam's first sin and also the constrained choices of our own sins after the fall.

The Particulars of Predestination

TEACHING NOTE

God, from eternity past, and for His own glory selected exactly which men and which angels would be saved and which would suffer the eternal consequences of that sin. It's a little bit hard for us to comprehend but the entire citizenship of heaven and hell were fixed in God on the basis this decision from all eternity. As a result, not a single person will be lost who should be saved, or shown mercy who has not been elected unto mercy. The mechanism for all of this is faith in Christ, either faith that looks forward to a coming Messiah as the saints of old, or a faith that clings fast to Christ as He has been revealed in the New Testament. There really are just two options, life or death. Faith in Christ or Hell.

For 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. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. Romans 8:29–30

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 3.3-5

3. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death.
4. These angels and men, thus predestinated and fore-ordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it can not be either increased or diminished.
5. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

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Angels and Men: The subjects of God's eternal decree of predestination include both human beings and angels. Some angels are elect, and so God preserved them from ever being tainted by sin, while others fell into sin by their own decision and deserve eternal destruction. The situation with humans is slightly more complicated because our first federal head chose sin on our behalf, causing all humanity to fall in sin, and so men need not just to be kept from further sin, but to be saved from the root of their sin. Yet, the decree of election is the same. God chose to save some angels and men and to damn others for their sins, and sovereign ordained all means to accomplish that end. (1 Timothy 5:21, Jude 6, Romans 9:22–23, Ephesians 1:4–5)

Predestined Unto Life: Predestination or election is decision from all eternity to save specific people and angels. It was not a general decree to offer salvation to such as would accept it, but a specific decree to save particular people. In the same way that every hair on our head is numbered and not one can fall from our heads without it being God's sovereign will, so each and every one of who has been elect will be doggedly pursued by our Lord, our objections overcome, our hearts transformed, and we will respond with genuine and personal faith. Not because God has seen that we will respond in faith, but rather because we are elect God ordains all of the means that will cause us to respond freely in faith. (Acts 13:48, Romans 8:29–30, Ephesians 1:4–5)

Passed Over for Death: Often called reprobation, this is God's sovereign decision from eternity to pass by, or refrain from saving, the non-elect, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin. Reformed theology distinguishes two aspects of this decree: God passes by them and condemns them. God passes them by through withholding the free gift of saving grace. Condemnation is God's judicial determination to punish them on the ground of their own actual sin and guilt. Salvation is an expression of God's free and unmerited mercy, while condemnation is an expression of His justice and holiness; both are good and give glory to God. (Romans 9:17–22, 1 Peter 2:8, Jude 4)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **The Confession says that the number of the elect and non-elect is “so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished.” Is this comforting or scary?**

It should give us comfort because our salvation is entirely secure in God's hands. It does not depend on us in the least, but on the unchangeable decree of an almighty God who promises that no one can snatch us out of His hand.

2. **God saves us without reference to our works, why is it vital to protect how we speak about the unconditional nature of grace?**

If election were conditional on our foreseen faith or good works, salvation would ultimately be based on our merit or cooperation. This would be death for us: an impossible hurdle for those still dead in their sins to overcome and an awful burden for the believer to struggle under. The good news of the gospel is that Christ loved us and died for us while we were still unlovely.

3. **What would you say to someone who said that God's eternal decree is unjust?**

God is God and we are not. Whatever he does is just, by definition, because he defines justice. There is a time when we need to just stop talking, be still and accept from His hand what He gives.

But more than that, remembering that we are dead in our sins, no one deserves mercy. It would be like receiving a birthday present from your grandparents and then getting upset that your grandparents didn't buy the same thing for everyone in your school. God's plan is good, just, and to the praise of His glorious Name.

4. Does God damn people because He saw that they would sin in the future?

No! But multiple things are going on here: He chose from eternity past to pass over them for mercy unconditionally and then He justly condemns them for the sin they freely choose in the course of history. So to put it differently, God from all eternity chose to pass them over for mercy and allowed them freedom to choose sin. He is not the author of evil, but neither does He destroy the freedom of our wills. It rests on God's eternal decree, but unfolds in the course of history.

5. Why does predestination matter for our faith?

It establishes salvation by grace. God is God and we are not. He has revealed to us in the scriptures how He has structured all of this and to what end. As a result we must believe, obey, and love His revealed will and plan because we love Him. More than that, it is GOOD! God is good and has mercifully chosen to save some from their sins and this salvation is completely and totally of grace.

References — Chapter 3

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– Monergism, *WCF Study Guide 3.3-3.5 - Predestination and Foreordination*

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Glossary — Chapter 3

A note on these definitions: this glossary was compiled with the help of AI, drawing on a number of sources. I am not the author of these definitions and do not claim them as my own work. They are offered as a study aid; Scripture and the Westminster Standards remain the authority.

Absolute —God is most absolute in that He depends upon nothing outside Himself and is bound by nothing but His own perfect nature. He is not conditioned, limited, or determined by any external thing, for all things derive from Him while He derives from none. His being and His decrees rest entirely upon His own free and sovereign will.

Actual Sin —The particular sins a person commits in thought, word, and deed, as distinct from the original sin inherited from Adam. Every actual sin flows from our corrupted nature, and every one is a real transgression of God's law for which we are personally responsible. The non-elect are condemned not generally as sinners but specifically for their own sins, both inherited and actual.

Angels and Men —The two kinds of rational creatures included in God's decree of predestination. The Confession teaches that "some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death," and that their number is so certain it cannot be increased or diminished. God kept the elect angels from falling, while the other angels fell by their own choice. God's decree reaches over all His rational creatures, in heaven and on earth.

Arminianism —The teaching of the followers of Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch theologian, who held that God elects people based on His foreknowledge of their faith, that Christ died to make salvation possible for all, that God's saving grace can be finally resisted, and that true believers can fall away. The Synod of Dort answered these views in 1619, and the Westminster Confession teaches the opposite on each point: salvation is entirely of God's free grace.

Author of Sin —The one who originates sin and bears the guilt of it. The Confession insists that although God ordains whatsoever comes to pass, He neither is nor can be "the author or approver of sin." The sinfulness of every sin "proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God." God ordains that sin will come to pass, but man freely chooses it and is fully responsible for it.

Calvinism —A system of Christian theology that seeks to summarize the teaching of Scripture concerning God's sovereignty in salvation and all of life. It emphasizes that salvation is entirely of God's grace, from election before the foundation of the world to the perseverance of the saints, often summarized in the Five Points of Calvinism (TULIP).

Canons of Dordt —Five doctrinal points formulated at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) in response to Arminianism, defining the Five Points of Calvinism and forming one of the Three Forms of Unity.

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

Contingency —That which could happen or not happen, depending on other circumstances. To God “nothing is contingent or uncertain,” for He knows and ordains all things. Yet the Confession says the contingency of second causes is not taken away but established: in our experience things really do depend on circumstances and choices. What is uncertain to us is always certain to God.

Covenant —A binding relationship that God sovereignly establishes with man, with promises and obligations. The Confession teaches that the distance between God and the creature is so great that we could never enjoy Him “but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.” Scripture speaks of the covenant of works with Adam and the covenant of grace in Christ.

Decree —God's eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, by which He has freely and unchangeably ordained whatsoever comes to pass. The decree is not a reaction to anything in time but the plan by which all of time unfolds. It includes not only the ends God intends but every means by which He brings them about, and it never makes God the author of sin or does violence to the will of the creature.

Doctrines of Grace —Another name for the Five Points of Calvinism (TULIP), emphasizing salvation as entirely God's gracious work.

Elect Angels —The angels whom God, by His eternal decree, chose to preserve from falling into sin (1 Timothy 5:21). The Confession teaches that “some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life.” Since the elect angels never sinned, they do not need a redeemer; God simply kept them. The angels who fell did so by their own choice and are reserved for judgment.

Election —God's sovereign choice from eternity to save certain individuals, not based on anything foreseen in them but solely on His good pleasure and free grace.

Federal Headship —The representative role of Adam and Christ for those under their respective covenants (the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace).

Foreknowledge —God's perfect knowledge of all things before they come to pass. God knows “whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions,” yet He has not decreed anything “because he foresaw it as future.” God does not look ahead to see what His creatures will do and then decide; rather, the future is certain because He has decreed it. God does not foreknow because things will happen; things will happen because God has foreordained them.

Foreordination —God's eternal appointment of what will come to pass, both the ends and the means. The Confession teaches that God has "fore-ordained all the means" by which He brings His elect to glory. To ordain is not merely to foresee or permit, but to determine with purpose. What God has foreordained is certain, and it comes to pass in the course of history through ordinary means and genuine human choices.

Free Will —The natural liberty God has given to man's will, so that it is never forced by God or by nature to do good or evil, but chooses according to its own desires. God's decree does not take this liberty away. Our ability to choose what is spiritually good, however, depends on our condition: Adam was able not to sin, fallen man is not able not to sin, and the believer is freed by grace to will and do what is good. We always choose freely, but we choose according to what we are.

Glorification —The final stage of salvation. At death, the souls of believers are made perfect in holiness and immediately pass into glory; at the resurrection, their bodies are raised in glory and reunited to their souls. Then they will be made perfectly blessed in the full enjoyment of God to all eternity. Glorification is certain for every believer, for "those whom he justified he also glorified" (Romans 8:30).

Godhead —The divine nature or Deity—the one, undivided, infinite essence that is God. The single Godhead subsists eternally in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, who are one in substance, power, and eternity. To speak of the Godhead is to speak of the fullness of what it is to be God.

Good Works —Works done in obedience to God's commandments, flowing from true faith, and aimed at God's glory. Good works are never the cause or condition of our election or justification, since God chose us "without any foresight of faith or good works." Yet they are the necessary fruit and evidence of true faith. We are not saved by good works, but we are saved for them.

Grace —God's unmerited favor toward sinners; His free gift of salvation and divine enablement that cannot be earned or deserved.

Heaven —The dwelling place of God, where Christ is now seated at the right hand of the Father. The Confession teaches that at death the souls of the righteous, "being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies." At the last day, the redeemed will dwell with God in body and soul forever.

Hell —The place of everlasting punishment, where the wicked who know not God and obey not the gospel are cast into eternal torment and punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord. Hell is not a place of chaos outside of God's rule but the righteous expression of His justice against sin. There is no one in hell who does not deserve to be there, and there is no one in heaven who does.

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

Immutable —Unchangeable in His being, perfections, purposes, and promises. God neither grows nor diminishes, neither learns nor forgets, neither improves nor decays, for He is already and eternally perfect. His immutability is the ground of all confidence in His Word, since what He has decreed and promised can never alter.

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

Merit —What a person deserves or earns by his own works. Before God, sinners merit nothing but wrath, and even our best works cannot earn God's favor, since they are already owed to Him and are stained with sin. That is why salvation is by grace: God's unmerited favor given freely in Christ. The only merit that saves is the merit of Christ's perfect obedience and sacrifice, credited to us by faith.

Omnipotence —God's infinite power, by which He is able to do all His holy will. God is "almighty," and nothing is too hard for Him. His omnipotence is never arbitrary; He cannot lie, cannot sin, and cannot deny Himself, because He always acts in perfect harmony with His own holy nature. His power is the believer's comfort, because the God who loves us is able to keep us.

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

Original Sin —The guilt of Adam's first sin together with the corrupted nature that every person inherits from him. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. Original sin is the root from which all actual sins grow, and it is why every person needs not only forgiveness but a new heart.

Passed Over for Death —Also termed reprobation or preterition, this refers to God's sovereign decision, according to His unsearchable counsel, to pass by the non-elect in the distribution of saving grace and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sins. In Westminster theology, this act manifests God's absolute sovereignty and holy justice, ensuring that while salvation is an act of pure mercy, condemnation is a righteous judgment for human rebellion.

Perseverance of the Saints —The doctrine that all who are truly regenerated and saved by God will continue in faith to the end and never finally fall away, kept securely by God's power.

Persons —The three distinct persons in the one God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. They are not three gods, not three parts of God, and not three names for one person. Each is fully God, sharing the one undivided divine substance, and they are distinguished from one another by their eternal relations: the Father begets, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds.

Predestination —God's eternal decree concerning the everlasting destiny of men and angels. The Confession teaches that "some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death." Predestination is one part of God's larger decree of all things. It includes election, God's free choice of some to salvation in Christ, and reprobation, His just passing by of others.

Predestined Unto Life —Also known as election, this is God's eternal, unchangeable, and unconditional choice of certain individuals to be saved and brought to everlasting glory. This decree is made before the foundation of the world, out of God's mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, good works, or perseverance in the creature as a condition or cause, and is executed through all the necessary means of salvation (redemption, calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, and preservation).

Reformed —The theological tradition emerging from the Protestant Reformation, characterized by a commitment to God's absolute sovereignty in salvation, covenant theology, and confessional standards.

Second Causes —The created causes through which God ordinarily works: the choices of men, the laws of nature, and the circumstances of life. God is the first cause of all things, yet He orders things to fall out "according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently." Rain truly makes the crops grow, and a man truly chooses what he does. God's decree does not take these causes away but establishes them.

Sola Gratia —The Reformation doctrine that salvation is entirely by God's free grace, without any human merit or contribution.

Soli Deo Gloria —The Reformation principle that all of creation, salvation, and human life exist ultimately to glorify God alone.

Soteriology —The theological study of salvation: its planning from eternity (election), accomplishment in history (atonement), application in time (calling, regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification), and final completion (glorification).

Sovereignty —God's absolute, supreme, and unchallengeable authority and dominion over the entire universe.

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

Substance —The essential divine nature shared identically, fully, and indivisibly by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Synod of Dort —The 1618–1619 international Reformed assembly that rejected Arminianism and formulated the Canons of Dort.

The Fall —The first sin of Adam and Eve, when they ate of the forbidden tree and broke the covenant of works. Because Adam stood as the representative of all mankind, the guilt of that sin is imputed to his posterity and the corruption of it is passed on to every person born by ordinary generation. Creation itself was subjected to the curse. The fall did not take God by surprise; it was ordained for His holy ends, yet it was entirely man's doing.

The Father —The first person of the Trinity. The Confession says "the Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding." He planned salvation from eternity, chose a people in Christ, sent the Son into the world, and, with the Son, sends the Spirit. Through Christ, believers are adopted as His children and may call Him "Abba, Father."

The Son —The second person of the Trinity, eternally begotten of the Father, who became incarnate as Jesus Christ to accomplish redemption and now reigns at the Father's right hand.

TULIP —The acronym for the Five Points of Calvinism: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.

Unconditional Election —God's eternal choice to save certain individuals based solely on His sovereign grace and good pleasure, not on any foreseen merit or condition in the creature.

Westminster Confession of Faith —The confession of faith written by the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s and published in 1647. It is a summary of the system of doctrine taught in Scripture, organized in thirty-three chapters, and it serves, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as the doctrinal standard of Presbyterian churches such as the PCA. It is a subordinate standard, always under the authority of Scripture.

Wrath of God —God's holy, settled, and just opposition to sin. God's wrath is not a sudden mood or loss of temper but the steady response of His unchanging holiness to evil. The same God who loves what is good necessarily opposes what is evil. For believers, God's wrath has been fully borne by Christ; for the unrepentant, it remains.



LESSON CONTENT



MONERGISM STUDY GUIDE